







**THE  
PURPOSE OF GOD  
AND THE  
CHRISTIAN LIFE**

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**APR 1963**



THE  
PURPOSE OF GOD  
AND THE  
CHRISTIAN LIFE

by  
*Fred L. Fisher*

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*To*  
**My Students**





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## *Preface*

**W**HY ANOTHER book, especially one dealing with the purpose of God? The answer must lie in the author's conviction that a book on this subject is important and needed. No other reason could justify the writing or the publishing of a book.

It is needed because there is so much confusion on the subject of God's redemptive purpose. It is one of the fallacies of theological thought, at least among common men, that one side or the other of a doctrinal question must be adopted. We often forget that a decision between "either/or" may not be necessary; it could be that the answer lies in "both/and"; or it could be that the answer is to be found in "neither/nor."

The debate over election and predestination goes back to the controversy between Calvinism and Arminianism, immediately following the Protestant Reformation. These two schools of thought stated God's purpose in individual salvation in diametrically opposite terms. Calvinists asserted that the salvation of the individual was due to the prior decision of God to save, a decision that rested in the eternal purpose of God. They also asserted, as a necessary (or so it seemed to them) corollary, that those persons not elected to salvation were predestined to damnation by divine decree. Arminians, on the other hand, held that each man's salvation depended on his personal faith in Jesus Christ. They did not deny the purpose of God but insisted that the purpose to save rested on a foreknowledge of the fact that men would exercise saving

faith. The damnation of those not saved was due, according to Arminianism, to their refusal of God's grace.

Which school of thought is right? It is the contention of this book that both are right in some important respects and both are wrong in some important respects. If the author must acknowledge belonging to either school, he would be forced to call himself a Calvinist but would do so with important reservations. It has been the effort of this author to approach the whole subject of God's redemptive purpose from the viewpoint of the New Testament, to seek an understanding of what is taught there, and to make its teachings regulative for his own belief. While unable to divorce himself entirely from the history of theological debate, he has endeavored to keep his involvement in it to a minimum.

Also, he has attempted to take advantage of important new insights into the theology of history which has arisen in our own generation of scholarship. God's purpose in history and his purpose to save, it was felt, cannot be divorced. Hence, this book is divided into two complementary parts, neither of which can be understood without a consideration of the other. Some chapters that are placed in one part of the study might very well and as relevantly have been placed in the other part. It is hoped that the consideration of all the elements in the discussion will enable the reader to reach some understanding of the glory of God as seen in his redemptive purpose in the world.

But why is such a discussion important? It is important because it establishes a basis of religious life, faith, and practice. Religion, at least the Christian religion, rests upon a belief in the purposive and creative presence of God in the world. All talk of prayer, of faith, of surrender to God, or of endeavor to serve God comes to nought without this foundation of belief. Yet, the Christian world stands in danger of losing this foundation. Because of the confusion over the issues, many Christians, even many preachers, have pushed

belief in the purpose of God into the background of their theology. It has become a neglected, if not forgotten, element in our faith. We continue to use the terminology of our fathers, to seek to inculcate faith in God, the practice of prayer, and missionary endeavor. But gradually the center of gravity has shifted from emphasis on the creative purpose of God to the efforts and dignity of man. This, I believe, can prove fatal to the practice and preaching of the Christian faith.

I have attempted to write in simple terms that can be understood by the layman, while recognizing that the issues are so complex that no presentation of the subject can be simple. I have attempted, as well, to reason so closely that my discussion may prove profitable to the student and scholar as well as to the layman. These aims, I recognize, are almost unattainable. I do not claim to have had success in reaching them. The reader must judge. May the God of grace, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, add his illumination to your thought as you wrestle to understand his purpose as it relates to the Christian life!

F. L. F.

*Mill Valley, California*



*Part One*

**THE PURPOSE OF GOD  
AND REDEMPTIVE HISTORY**





## INTRODUCTION

### *The Priority of God*

THE FUNDAMENTAL datum of any theology of history is not sin, not creation, but the absolute priority of God over the world and its history.<sup>1</sup> All things begin with God. Redemptive history, the subject of the Bible, begins with the assertion of the creative work of God; it presupposes the existence and purpose of God. Theologians have used a number of terms to describe the priority of God in history and redemption: foreknowledge, predestination, foreordination, providence, and election. We will include all that is meant by these various terms in our discussion of the purpose of God. We are assuming that God has a purpose — a pretemporal purpose, a purpose that has its only ground and reason in the eternal God, a purpose that he is working out in the world. The consummation of this purpose will not find its ultimate fulfillment in history; the goal is to be found beyond history, in that life which we have learned to call heaven.

This idea of God's purposive activity in history is one of the central ideas, if not *the* central idea, of the Bible. It constitutes the center of both the Old and New Testaments.<sup>2</sup> The Revelation constantly expresses the author's faith that God is the ultimate mover and goal of history in such words as: "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev. 1:8). The thought of God's purposive activity is often expressed by Paul and is a basic tenet of his theology. "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for-

ever." (Rom. 11:36.) He considered the salvation of each Christian as finding its source in the election of God (Eph. 1:4-5), the course of redemptive history as the outworking of God's purpose (Eph. 1:11), and his own salvation and call to the apostolic ministry as being foreknown and wrought of God (Gal. 1:15-16). His most significant theological statement of the meaning of Christ was: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (II Cor. 5:19).

We must not be misled into thinking that the doctrine of God's purpose is an invention of the apostle Paul; it is woven into the fabric of the Biblical record from beginning to end. Abraham is called of God, directed in his life by God, and finds the meaning of his life in doing the will of God (Gen., chs. 12 to 15). Moses is raised up of God and made a deliverer of the Children of Israel (Ex., ch. 3); the praise for deliverance, however, is not to Moses but to God (Ex. 20:1-2). The Book of Judges is a story of how God delivered his people in times of distress and trial. The histories of such men as David, Solomon, Isaiah, and Jeremiah are but historical manifestations of the moving of God in the area of human life. In the study of the Old Testament, modern scholars have paid little attention to the doctrine of God's purpose. But "there can be no real understanding of the meaning of the Old Testament nor of the course of Israel's history without paying close attention to it."<sup>3</sup>

Not only is this doctrine the center of the Bible; it is also the basis of faith in God. "Without this conviction, there could be no significant monotheism."<sup>4</sup> The very idea of God, at least the Christian idea, depends upon belief that God is working out his own purpose in the world. Theologians talk about the absoluteness of God,<sup>5</sup> by which they mean that God is perfect and independent. Nothing rules him; he rules all. In his relationship with the world, God cannot be thought of as one who follows along and accomplishes all the good he can as conditions permit. He, if he is absolute and ulti-

mate, must be the creative factor in world history. He must be working out a purpose; he must have a goal. It is impossible to retain any real faith in God and believe that anything can ultimately thwart the accomplishment of his purpose. This does not mean that everything that is is what God desires. A careful distinction must be made between the desire of God and the purpose of God. Future discussion, we trust will enable us to make this distinction clear.

Deism, it is true, holds to the absoluteness of God while denying his active purpose in the world. But deism is not the Christian thought about God. "Love," "righteousness," "justice," and "holiness" are used by practically all Christian writers in their attempts to describe the nature of God in terms that can be understood by the human mind. None of these terms have any real meaning aside from belief in the purpose of God in the world. Love that does not plan for and act for the good of the beloved is not love at all. Righteousness that does not seek the overthrow of the reign of evil is not righteousness. Justice that does not seek to establish right is not justice. So we see that the very basis of the Christian faith in God is belief in the moving power of God in the world. The doctrine of the purpose of God is basic to Christian theology.

Likewise, the whole meaning of religious life is based on belief in a God of purpose and power. That which is the core of religion is the sense of dependence.<sup>6</sup> Man's soul cries out for one on whom he may depend and to whom he may pray with the conviction that his life and the conditions of the world can be changed for the better. He finds his need met in the God of the Bible. But it is not really met unless God truly has power in the world and unless God's purpose is moving in the direction of the establishment of right. Man's religion evaporates into nothingness unless God is really God. If a man depends on or prays to a God who will not act or cannot act in the world on man's behalf, man's religion is an illusion.

Yet, such belief creates problems; there are elements of mystery connected with the Christian faith. It is hard to see how God can be the master of the universe when nature is sometimes so destructive and capricious. It is hard to see how God can be the ruler of history when there is so much apparent in human life that is evidently not the desire of God. It is hard to see how God can be the savior of men when so many are still unsaved. Our purpose will be an attempt to state the doctrine of God's purpose, both on the universal stage of history and in the life of the individual man, in such a way that some of the elements of mystery will be dissolved and the doctrine will be restored to the central place in Christian thought which it deserves.

## CHAPTER

# I

### *In the Beginning*

**T**HE BOOK of Genesis begins its recital of the mighty acts of God with the affirmation, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). With this opening statement of Scripture, all other Scripture agrees. Jesus made the thought of God as creator the basis of his teaching about the relation of God and the world.<sup>1</sup> John begins his Gospel with the assertion that Jesus was in existence at the beginning of the world, that he is truly the eternal Logos, and that all things came into existence through him (John 1:1-3). The source of John's Logos doctrine has been hotly debated, but it is most likely found in the Old Testament, particularly in the first chapter of Genesis, where we are told that God spoke and the world came into being.<sup>2</sup> Stephen, speaking to the Jewish Sanhedrin, quoted Isaiah to show that the institutions of Judaism — the Temple and sacrifices — could have no enduring validity because heaven is the throne of God and earth is his footstool (Acts 7:49). Plainly, acceptance of God's creation of and sovereignty over nature lies behind this statement.

Creation is the basic theme of Paul's thought about the physical world. Nature shows the eternal power and deity of its creator so clearly that idolatry is without excuse (Rom. 1:19-21). The present state of creation is due to the will of God, and its expectation is grounded in his purpose (Rom. 8:19-22). God arranged the organs of the human body in their wonderful unity (I Cor. 12:18-24). God, the Father, is

he "from whom are all things and for whom we exist" (I Cor. 8:6). Christ is the agent through whom all things were created (Col. 1:16-18). Every food may be received with thanksgiving because God is the creator of it (I Tim. 4:4). Peter gives his testimony that it was by the word of God that all things came to exist (II Peter 3:5). The Revelation makes creation the central theme of heaven's song of praise addressed to the Father (Rev. 4:11) and the guarantee of the fulfillment of the purpose of God (Rev. 10:6-7).

It is evident, then, that belief in creation is shared by all the Biblical writers, of both the Old and New Testaments. It is a part of the *givenness* of their religious faith. In the very nature of the case, the fact of creation cannot be proved; it must be accepted by faith. "By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear." (Heb. 11:3.) This is not to say that such belief is irrational.<sup>8</sup> It is simply to say that there is no way of proving its truth. The belief is neither scientific nor unscientific; rather, it is supra-scientific. Nor is this religious affirmation of faith to be classed with the quite unscientific (by today's science) opinion that the world is a square, flat, three-storied affair. The cosmology of the Bible is that which was common to the ancient world, a cosmology based on insufficient data. But the doctrine of creation was not cosmology; it was faith. It was not a conclusion of research; it was a truth of revelation. The debate over creation must never be thought of as a debate between science and religion over the method of the formation of the world; it is a debate between rival faiths over the reason for the world's existence.

If we are to understand the Bible, we must realize that the doctrine of creation was not formulated to explain the origin of the world. It was not a fact of science or history but a basic fact of religion, of faith. Biblical men were not interested in the world as such — either its cause or the method of its crea-

tion; they were interested in the Creator. The doctrine of creation at once explained the nature of the world and the nature of God. The one word "creation" draws a gulf between the Greek and Jewish ideas of God and the world.<sup>4</sup> To the Greek, the world was "cosmos"; the reality of the world was absolute. To the Jew, the world was "creation." The world was relative; God was absolute and eternal. God is not dependent on the universe or contained in it in any way. He is sovereign over nature and may do as he chooses with his universe.<sup>5</sup> The universe does not contain God; it reveals truth about him (Rom. 1:19-21). God's sovereignty here guarantees the accomplishment of his purpose everywhere (Rev. 10:6-7). What the Biblical writers were concerned about was the end or purpose of God in the world, and they found, in the doctrine of creation, the assurance that God was working out a redemptive purpose for man.<sup>6</sup> In creation, God was setting the stage for his mighty acts of redemption.

The story of creation in Genesis focuses its attention on man; he is the center of attraction. The writer rushes on, giving mere mention to those things which concern modern science so greatly, impatient to tell the story of how man came to be and of what he is. He shows true spiritual insight into the significance of the creative act of God. Man, we are told, was created in the "image of God" (Gen. 1:27). He was a part of the world, for God formed him out of the "dust from the ground" (Gen. 2:7). But he was apart from the world, for God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7). Likewise, he was set apart from God, for he did not share the moral perfection and maturity of God.<sup>7</sup> He was not the exact expression of God's nature as Christ was (Heb. 1:3); he was made in the "image" of God.

This expression has been an enigma to theologians in all ages. What does the Scripture mean when it says that man was made in the "image" of God? The Bible gives partial



answers. It may mean that he was put into a place of dominion over the world (Gen. 1:26, 28; 2:15, 19; I Cor. 11:3; James 3:7). It may mean that he is invested with majesty and authority (Ps. 8:6). Biblical writers are inclined to define — if “define” is a proper word for their writing — the nature of man by his position in the world. Others have attempted to define the “image of God” in metaphysical terms. Mullins thinks the image of God is found in the nature of man as rational, emotional, moral, volitional, and free.<sup>8</sup> Others are not so anxious to give definition to the phrase; they find its meaning in man’s capacity for fellowship with God, in his capacity to hear God’s voice and to pray.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps we can satisfy ourselves with this meaning. Whatever else it signifies, the “image of God” pictures man as one with the capacity for God. God made him that he might love him, and gave him the power to return his love freely and voluntarily. Man has the potential for godlike character, but not the full realization of it. Character can be developed only in the crucible of moral action; it must be hammered out in the tension of decision between right and wrong and is realized only when one’s free choices are crystallized in the direction of right.

It is this potential which explains the arrangement made for man’s life upon the earth. All was prepared for him; he was given dominion over the earth, but not over himself. A moral restriction was placed upon his life. He was not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil; if he did, death would be the penalty (Gen. 2:17). We do not know what the “tree of knowledge of good and evil” signifies. Perhaps it is symbolic of some experience for which Adam was not spiritually prepared. The primary purpose of the restriction, we may believe, was to test the love and loyalty of man. Would man be willing to live under the rule of God, or would he seek his own self-glorification? Would he be satisfied with his own place in the world, or would he seek to usurp God’s place?

The answer is found in the meaning of sin. In a decisive act, man threw off the yoke of God and sought his own independence (Gen., ch. 3). When he did, the whole meaning of his existence was shattered.<sup>10</sup> He became an outlaw in God's world, a fugitive from God's presence (Gen. 3:8). The curse of death was pronounced upon him, and he was driven from the garden (Gen. 3:15-24). But judgment was mingled with mercy. God promised a seed of the woman, which would bruise the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15), a promise which Paul felt was fulfilled in the coming of Christ (Gal. 4:4-5); he clothed the guilty couple with skins of animals (Gen. 3:21), which may be symbolic of the covering for sin that he would provide; and he drove them from the tree of life, which, if they ate of it, would doom them to perpetual life in a world of sin and death (Gen. 3:24).

In all this, though it but dimly reflects the redemptive acts of God, we are reminded that God did not give up when man failed. He had set his heart on bringing man into the fellowship of love with himself; the stage was now set for the great drama of redemption, which is the subject of the rest of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. The stories of Gen., chs. 1 to 3, are but an introduction to the whole movement of redemptive history, in which God moves to make man what he intended him to be. The Bible becomes a saga of God's movements to realize his dream of a perfect people in a perfect world, living in perfect fellowship with God and with one another.

In the achievement of this dream, two necessities faced God. He had to reveal himself to man, and he had to deal with the problem of sin. Each of these tasks had two sides — an objective and a subjective. A revelation had to be made in the world, but this revelation would be meaningless unless men in their own hearts came to "know" God. A sacrifice for sin had to be made that would remove sin as an obstacle blocking fellowship between God and man, but this sacrifice

would be powerless unless men accepted it and let its power cleanse them of sin and restore them to fellowship with God. How God actually did accomplish these tasks is the subject of the Bible.

There was, first, the necessity for God to reveal himself in such a way that man could come to realize that his fulfillment and happiness is to be found only in fellowship with God. Part of the curse of sin is spiritual blindness, which leads a man to look upon God as his enemy. "The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot." (Rom. 8:7.) Such knowledge as was needed could come only through self-revelation on God's part. This task, begun and carried on in the dealings of God with Israel, reached its objective consummation in Christ, in the incarnation of God. On its subjective side, it is still in process and may be for all eternity. God is still at work in our world through the witness of the Bible, the preaching of the gospel, and the ministry of his churches to fulfill this part of his task.

Second, God faced the necessity of dealing with the problem of sin in the human life. Paul said: "Sin came into the world through one man. . . . One man's trespass led to condemnation for all men." (Rom. 5:12, 18.) The nature and method of the corruption of the race by this one sin has been the subject of much debate. It seems to mean that the yielding of Adam to sin defiled the race at its source to the extent that every man born into the world is born with an inherent tendency to self-rule, which will ensure his personal sin and condemnation. We do not believe that any other man is condemned for Adam's sin except Adam; we *do* see evidence that the race is so corrupted that every man does sin. In the light of the universality of sin, the Biblical belief that the tendency toward sin is inherent seems reasonable. At any rate, sin had become an integral part of the race, and God faced the necessity of dealing with it if he was to redeem man. Some-

how, there had to be a bearing of the curse of sin so that the full penalty would not need to be inflicted on man. The way had to be opened for the free flow of the love of God into the life of men without violating the principles of righteousness and justice that are as much a part of God as his love. God must not destroy himself in saving man. This task was consummated in the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the sins of the world; he "offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins" (Heb. 10:12) — himself. This offering was foreshadowed in the sacrifices of Israel, but it and it alone dealt with finality with the problem of sin. However, this sacrifice would be powerless unless it was appropriated by man. Only when the individual man can be led to surrender himself to the gracious power of God is sin overcome in his heart and he is made a new man. Subjectively, therefore, the task continues.

The following chapters will attempt to trace the main outline of how God did and does accomplish his dream for men. This is the subject of the Bible. The carrying out of the divine design is at once the mystery and the clear, shining light of all that the Biblical writers have to say as they record God's dealings with them. It must be remembered that, to them, God was always the mover, the initiator of redemption. His purpose, no less than his acts, is the subject of their record, for his acts are but the effective carrying out of his purpose.

## CHAPTER

## II

### *God's Purpose in Nature*

**G**OD NOT only created the world; he governs it for redemptive ends. This is the constant emphasis of the Bible whenever the subject of the material universe arises in the minds of men of faith. Consideration of such matters existed only on the fringes of the thought of Biblical writers; it never occupied the center of their attention, as it so often does among modern men. But some consideration must be given to the subject if we are to make a complete study of the saving activity and purpose of God in the world.

There are those who would shut God up in the world; there are others who would shut God out of the world. Biblical writers never succumb to either error. Pantheism would identify God and the world in such a way that they cannot be distinguished.<sup>1</sup> God is thought of as an all-inclusive principle, so that it could be said that everything is God and God is everything. Deism, like the Judaism of Christ's day,<sup>2</sup> would separate God from the world. God's creation is thought of as a past event, a setting in motion of a "self-sufficient and self-contained system which thenceforth obeyed invariable laws."<sup>3</sup>

The Biblical writers never make the mistake of pantheism, identifying God with the world. The Old Testament statement "Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool" (Isa. 66:1), was so axiomatic that New Testament writers often quoted it.<sup>4</sup> This saying clearly indicates that it is a mistake to identify God with the world. It would be foreign to the reverence of the Biblical men to make such an identifica-

tion as pantheism makes. Nowhere is there any evidence of reverence for the forces of nature or the things of the material world. Such an identification actually destroys the idea of God; nature becomes God.<sup>5</sup>

Likewise, the Biblical writers never separate God from the world. The world in its present condition is "far from being God's Kingdom—it remains his work and workshop."<sup>6</sup> To Jesus, God was truly "Lord of heaven and earth" (Matt. 11:25). His creative presence in the world is recognized; he causes the sun to shine and sends the rain upon the earth (Matt. 5:45); he feeds the "birds of the air" (Matt. 6:26); he "clothes the grass of the field" with a glory that even Solomon could not equal (Matt. 6:29-30). God's control of nature is such that the disciple is to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11), and the child of God may depend on God to give good things to those who ask of him (Matt. 7:11). Paul is in thorough agreement with Jesus' view of God's sovereign control of nature. He looked upon the world as being upheld by the power of God operating in Christ (Col. 1:17).

This, of course, raises the question of God's relation to natural law, a debate that has raged for the past century in many circles and still is undecided. One is inclined to think that the debate is unnecessary, that it has arisen from a confusion of the issues. Men of science have sometimes overstepped the boundaries of the objective study of nature and have spoken as philosophers who seek to define the forces that are operative in nature. Men of faith, on the other hand, have sometimes set up the Bible as a rival book of science.<sup>7</sup> The problem is that neither group has retained a clear-cut understanding of its task and of the scope of its work. The task of science is to discover by objective study of nature the relations that exist between various phenomena in the world. No one can deny that a certain orderliness exists in the natural world and that this orderliness can be discovered by objec-

tive study. Science has done the human race an untold service in its work. However, no one can assert on the basis of objective study that things which ordinarily happen must always happen. Nor can objective study of nature tell us what is the ultimate force or power that causes things to happen. Modern science is more humble than the science of a generation ago; it is now recognized that the laws of nature do not prescribe a "rigid framework" that guarantees a single result, but indicate the range of probabilities "involving alternatives and latitude."<sup>8</sup> So long as science stays with its task and does not attempt to overstep the boundaries of its own discipline, it does not conflict with faith.

Religion has no quarrel with science; religion and science operate in two different fields. It is the task of religion to define the ultimate source of the power that causes the results which science observes. The alternative is not between science and Christianity but between Christian faith and some other view of history.<sup>9</sup> Faith affirms that natural law is God's ordinary method of governing the universe. Any statement that would deny that natural law is God's law is a rival philosophy of nature and should not parade under the guise of science, even if made by a man of science.

What we have in the Bible, then, is not a system of science but a theology of nature — a belief that it is God who controls and governs the forces of nature. To the Biblical writers, this control is not merely the control of a divine engineer who has created a machine and set it in motion, leaving it to run itself. Neither is this control that of a child who capriciously manipulates the forces of nature to suit his whims. It is, rather, the control constantly and creatively exercised by the living God, whose main concern is for the salvation of man. Nevertheless, it is the universal belief of the prophetic writings that God can do with his universe whatever he wills.<sup>10</sup> It is God who controls nature, and "his control . . . is everywhere correlated to the one historical purpose, the manifesta-

tion of his glory.”<sup>11</sup> The world of nature is the “stage” on which God directs the drama of salvation.<sup>12</sup>

The purpose and meaning of the stage in the drama might be called the “theology” of nature which is contained in the Bible. We need not expect that our attention will be directed often toward the stage, since it has no meaning in itself. But on occasion, because it will help us to understand the drama itself, the stage is placed in the foreground for a moment.

First, it is the thought of the Bible that nature reflects the glory of God. The classic expression of this is found in Ps. 19:1-2: “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.” Paul declares that idolatry is “without excuse” because the “eternal power and deity” of God is revealed in nature (Rom. 1:20). However, there is a definite limitation on the function of nature in this respect; it can never take the place of the revelation of God in other ways. The Bible never views nature as sufficient to reveal the grace of God or as a substitute for the revelation of God in Christ.

Second, the Biblical writers believed that God manipulated or controlled nature to bring blessings upon the obedient and judgment upon the disobedient. God sends full barns and winepresses upon those who honor him with their substance (Prov. 3:9-10). Solomon is told that the land may be healed if God sends a drought, the locusts, or a pestilence on his people (II Chron. 7:13-14). The way of healing is to be found, not in better methods of agriculture, but in the humble prayer and true repentance of the people of God. When Elijah asked God to bring three rainless years to the land, he was rebuked by the king as the “troubler of Israel.” His reply was: “I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father’s house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals” (I Kings 18:17-18). Plainly the thought



of Elijah was that the withholding of rain was a judgment on sin. These are only characteristic statements of Biblical men. God's control of nature was seen as absolute and was used to call his people to repentance and righteousness. One may refuse to believe that such a view of nature is true; and certainly there is no way to prove its truth. It is a fact of revelation, an affirmation of faith, and must remain so.

It is only in such a context of faith that a discussion of miracles is possible. A denial of the possibility of miracle is a denial of God's control of nature. On the other hand, an affirmation of faith that God controls nature carries with it the belief in the possibility of miracle. If God controls nature, there may be times when he will accomplish in nature what seems to men to be miraculous. If God's main concern is the salvation of men, not the uniformity of nature, there will be times when miracles will occur if they can contribute to the salvation of men.

The Bible records the occurrence of miracles. Two things need to be noted in relation to the Biblical record. First, the miraculous is never an upsetting of nature; it is never the invasion of a stranger into the natural world.<sup>18</sup> Rather, miracles almost uniformly are recorded as God's supernatural action in restoring the health or welfare of some individual. They are works of mercy and they are benevolent in nature. Second, *miracles always have redemptive significance*. It needs to be noted that the Bible is not a book of miracles. There is a scarcity of miracles, or so it seems to one who has been exposed to the debate about the possibility of miracle. They are clustered around a few great men who were inaugurating a new departure in the redemptive work of God. In the Old Testament, Moses, the founder of the law, and Elijah and Elisha, the founders of prophecy, are the main miracle workers. Only a few isolated instances of miracle are to be found otherwise. Why is this true? Was it because these men had superior faith? No. It was because they were inaugurating a new

departure in God's redemptive program. They needed to be authenticated as the true messengers of God. This was the real reason why God worked miracles through them.

This reason explains why we would expect to find and why we do find that Jesus and the apostles performed miracles. They were inaugurating the final step in God's redemptive program. They could claim the authority of God; they could point to their work as contained in prophecy and law. But the common man could not see this. He needed convincing. Therefore, performance of miracles was a part of their ministry. God was giving a sign of their divine commission. Nicodemus said to Jesus, "We know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him." (John 3:2.) This, then, is the explanation of the miracles of the Bible. They are used of God to authenticate his messengers and to lead men to accept that which is new in his redemptive program.

Perhaps this explains why miracles are no longer a part of the Christian ministry. There is no redemptive purpose to be achieved by them. Our ministry is authenticated today by its harmony with the teachings of the New Testament. We have accepted a canon of measurement for any Christian message; we have no need for miracles. We need not be surprised if none are performed; it would be more surprising if any were.

In all of this discussion, our aim has been to point out that in the grand sweep of God's redemptive purpose, his control of nature is one factor. He created the world for redemptive ends; he continues to control it for redemptive ends. For the man of faith, the facts of science are immaterial to his faith. He may accept them and believe them, but in the realm of faith he is concerned about one thing — what controls nature and why is nature controlled as it is? His answer is that God controls it and that it is controlled for redemptive ends.

## CHAPTER

### III

#### *God's Purpose in World History*

WHAT IS the meaning of history? What is the key to understanding it? These questions have haunted the minds of historians from the time that man first attempted to make some sense out of the course of events in which he was involved. Many answers have been given. Some persons have sought the answer in such uncontrollable factors as hazard, right, luck, law, moral order, fate, or necessity.<sup>1</sup> Others have thought to find the key to history in certain natural factors, such as race, geography, biology, or economics. The Bible finds the key in the purpose of God. What we have in the Biblical writers is not so much a writing of history as a "theology" of history. Though the so-called natural factors are not ignored, the crucial factor, the creative factor, in all history is God.

"When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son." (Gal. 4:4). In this one statement, Paul gathers up the faith of the apostles and the prophets in the creative presence of God in the course of history. He affirms that the whole course of history prior to the coming of Christ had one central meaning—it was moving toward a predetermined point when time would be full and God could send his Son into the world to redeem it from sin. Nor did he think of that moving as a happy coincidence of events which by chance produced a set of circumstances favorable to the launching of the Christian movement. He believed that God was the mover of history, the directing genius, that he controlled it by his power and for

his own purpose — the redemption of man.

When we say that the Bible contains a "theology" of history, we are really saying too much. Such a statement implies that some one of wisdom has set forth in a systematic manner the relationship between God and the events of the world. Such is not the case in the Bible. It might be more accurate to say that we have a few data on which a tentative "theology" of history can be constructed. There is no attempt by Biblical writers to present a world history; many of the events and movements that writers of world history have found to be of supreme importance are not even mentioned in the Bible. When the nations are mentioned at all, they are mentioned as they come into contact with the redemptive work of God. We are left to formulate our own theology of history from the incidental statements of the Bible and from the record of specific events in which the hand of God is discerned. Our purpose in this chapter is to investigate the meaning of history as the sphere of God's redemptive work, i.e., to formulate a "theology" of history, to relate the course of human affairs to the redemptive movement of God.

We must recognize that such an effort is fraught with peril and subject to question. It is subject to question because there is no way of proving that God had anything at all to do with a particular occurrence of history. His hand is seen only by the eyes of faith; unbelievers may interpret each event of history as the simple interplay of human factors. In the reading of the Bible, in this respect as in all others, faith must speak to faith, and faith must respond to faith. Our effort is fraught with peril because we are faced with seemingly contradictory phenomena. For instance, how could mad Caligula, who attempted to make the whole world worship him, be a "servant of God"? There is certainly no "pat" answer for every question; there is no way by which the modern scholar may interpret the redemptive significance of every particular event of history. The reason that this is impossible is that

"we do not — in our present life — cannot — see particular facts in the total system of their relations; and so cannot read them in their divine interpretation." <sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, the attempt must be made, not to interpret all the events of history, but to discover the underlying and basic principle of God's control of history — a principle that operated in all of past history and that the man of faith believes is still operative in human affairs. This attempt must be made if we are to understand the Biblical record. Biblical writers believed that the control of history was vested in a factor that belongs to the realm beyond history. This supernatural factor "cannot be explained away without rewriting the Bible and falsifying the witness of its writers." <sup>3</sup>

Our attention, in this chapter, will be focused on "general" history as opposed to "redemptive" history,<sup>4</sup> a distinction that is commonplace among modern scholars but would have been foreign to Biblical writers.<sup>5</sup> They regarded the whole process of history as the sphere of God's redemptive activity and the outcome of that process as the achievement of his redemptive design. However, even Biblical writers recognized that the activity of God in Israel's history was different from that in world history, that his control was more constant, more purposeful, more direct there. In our discussion, therefore, it will be necessary to consider world history separately, though recognizing that the interplay of forces between "general" and "redemptive" history is such that a hard and fast division between the two cannot be maintained.

Biblical writers recognized that *the nations* were in conflict with God, that they were subject to the authority of demonic powers, that whatever service they rendered to God was unwitting and unwilling service. The life of the unsaved man was considered to follow the course of this world, "following the prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2). The Christian was urged to arm himself with the whole armor of God to fight "against the wiles of the devil" and "against the

world rulers of this present darkness" (Eph. 6:11-12). The early church thought of the persecution by the Jews as being a fulfillment of the Second Psalm (cf. Acts 4:24-26) and quoted the words of the psalm to show that opposition to the will of God was to be expected from the world.

Yet, they believed that God's sovereign power overruled the wickedness of the nations and made them his servants. Jesus said "In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." (John 16:33.) The ruler of the world, the devil, has been judged (John 16:11). The book of Revelation presents in symbolic language the titanic struggle between God and the powers of the world as they were expressed in the Roman Empire, and proclaims with shining faith the victory of God. Whenever the subject of the struggle between God and the world comes to the front in the Bible, the constant theme is the sovereign control of God, which overcomes the opposition of the powers of the world and turns their activity to his own ends.

How is this portrayed? One is found in the writers' assertion that *the powers of the world are determined and ordained of God*. Paul says, "he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation." (Acts 17:26.) He asserts further that "there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Rom. 13:1). It is within this context of God's control of history that the difficult chapters of Romans (chs. 9 to 11) are to be understood. Paul is here discussing God's control of history, through which God is working out his redemptive purpose. Within the limits of this control, there are diverse vessels, one "for beauty and another for menial use" (Rom. 9:21). Some are chosen to accomplish the will of God in one way and others in another way. Pharaoh, for instance, is told by God: "I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in

all the earth" (Rom. 9:17; cf. Ex. 9:16).

This concept of God's control of history finds its expression in the Old Testament also. Nebuchadnezzar is judged by the sovereign God and condemned to dwell with the beasts of the field until "you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will" (Dan. 4:25). Amos asserts that God will not only judge the sinful Children of Israel but will also send judgment upon Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, and the children of Ammon (Amos, ch. 1). Thus we see that the Biblical writers believed that the creative mover of history was God. He determined beforehand who and what kind of men would exercise power in the world; he was the true "kingmaker" of the earth. When his redemptive purpose called for the action of some power in a certain way, that power would be present and ready to act by divine arrangement. If this is true, and men of faith believe that it is, it will give us a feeling of security in the midst of a chaotic world. The powers that be are still ordained of God. Though we may find it impossible to see how some of our modern powers can be used to promote the redemptive program of God, we may be sure that God knows, that he is still working out his redemptive design in the world.

How do the movements of history serve God? This is a difficult question. In some cases the answer is quite apparent; in others it is impossible to see. The confluence of Greek culture and Roman power at the time of the inauguration of Christianity is clearly seen as the arrangement of divine Providence. The Greek language and culture created a world climate in which the new religion could be promoted and could gain a foothold in the hearts of men. The Roman power created a political climate, the Pax Romana, in which Christianity could be preached. If Greek power had prevailed, Christianity would have had a more difficult time; the Greek rulers were missionaries for Greek ideas and sought to put down any foreign innovations. Had Roman culture prevailed,

the path of Christianity would have been equally difficult. The Romans were concerned only with law and order; they discouraged any change in thought or religion. Thus we can see that God must have arranged for the Roman power to prevail but for the Greek culture to be universal.

Other events and movements are not so easily explained. We share our perplexity with ancient Israel. Israel could not understand why an evil nation had been permitted to take them captive. Was it because the hand of the Lord had been shortened, that it could not save (Isa. 59:1)? The answer of the prophet is that this is not the reason. Rather, Assyria, says God, is "the rod of my anger, the staff of my fury! Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him" (Isa. 10:5-6). Neither the king of Assyria nor the people of Israel understood. The king boasted, "By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom." (Isa. 10:13.) Because of his proud boasting, God proclaims of the king of Assyria, "When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem he will punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria and his haughty pride" (Isa. 10:12).

In this example, we see something of the principle involved in God's sovereign control of history. An evil nation, led by a boastful king, has been raised up to become the instrument of God's judgment on his own people. Boasting in his own strength and believing that he is acting on his own initiative, the king serves God. But his service is without honor or reward. When it is finished, God will judge and destroy him for his pride. This is indicative of only one way in which God may use a nation of the world. Other nations may be used to deliver his people, others to establish peace, others to spearhead a movement of culture — but all are used. This is the faith of the Biblical writers.

God's control of history is absolute and universal. This does not mean that everything that happens in the world is



what God desires. Nothing happens that he does not permit. What is affirmed is that God has the final say, that though he does not purpose all things, he has a purpose in all things. He is the creative factor that causes all the movements of history to serve his redemptive purpose. Prior to the coming of Christ, history was ordered to prepare the way for his coming and to open the paths for the inauguration of the Christian movement. But God's control of history did not end there. He continues to control it and to use it to promote his redemptive program in the world. The path and method of his control is uncharted by prophetic word. We may dimly see it in the movements of the past, but we can never hope to trace it in the movements of the present. However, the man of faith believes that the fact of God's control is true, and is comforted and encouraged by his faith that the meaning of life on earth is to be found in the sovereign purpose of God.

## CHAPTER

## IV

### *God's Purpose in Israel*

**S**ALVATION IS from the Jews" (John 4:22). This one statement by Jesus epitomizes the belief of New Testament writers that the roots of Christianity are planted firmly in Jewish soil. The focal point of God's redemptive activity, prior to the coming of Christ, is to be found in his election of Israel to be the "people of God." In our study in the previous chapter, we were warned against the danger of a mechanical division of history into "general" and "redemptive" history. However, this should not blind us to the fact that both the Old and New Testaments see peculiar redemptive significance in the history of Israel and in God's dealings with that nation.

It is almost an axiom of Biblical study that the Old Testament is constructed so as to set forth the election of Israel. The book of the "beginnings," i.e., Genesis, is meant to introduce us to the process by which God moved from the race to the nation. After the stage of the drama of redemption is set in the story of the Fall (Gen., chs. 1 to 3), the selective process begins. One of Adam's sons, Seth, who was raised up to take Abel's place, is chosen, but the descendants of Cain are rejected. Of the line of Seth, Noah is chosen. Of the sons of Noah, Shem is chosen; of Shem's descendants, Abraham is chosen to be the father of many nations, the special recipient of the blessings of God, and the channel of God's blessing to the world (Gen. 12:1-3). Isaac alone, of the sons of Abraham, becomes the recipient of the election of God. Jacob, whose name is changed to Israel, becomes the father of twelve sons

who, in turn, are progenitors of the twelve tribes that comprised the chosen nation.

The rest of the Old Testament focuses its attention, with scarcely a mention of the rest of mankind, upon the varying fortunes of the chosen nation under the tutelage and protection of God. The story is told with deliberate intention to emphasize that it is God who is responsible for the peculiar history of the nation. The modern Bible student has no need to be reminded of the details of the deliverance from Egypt, of the founding of the covenant relation, of the settlement in the Promised Land, of the establishment of the kingdom, of the captivity of the nation and its return to the Promised Land after a period of chastisement. Nor does he need to be reminded of the various methods that God used to exercise his control over the nation — the Temple, the prophets, and the kings of Israel. The whole story is replete with the gracious patience of God as he seeks to make himself known to his people and to develop them into a vehicle of his grace to the world. Whether one is willing to accept the truth of Israel's interpretation of its own history or not, he must be aware that that interpretation is alive with the sense of divine election and divine grace.

The New Testament writers accept without question the validity of Israel's election and the continuity of the new religion with the old. Insistence upon continuity does not mean identification. The New Testament writers, as we shall see, looked upon the Christian religion as different from Judaism and as superseding it. But they, like Jesus, considered the roots of their religion to be planted firmly in Jewish soil. This is shown, in one instance, by the reinterpretation of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah. All four Gospels begin their story of Jesus with the ministry of John the Baptist, whose emergence is considered to be in accordance with divine purpose.<sup>1</sup> Each of them quotes the famous passage from Isaiah to explain the place of John in the

redemptive plan of God: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'" (John 1:23; cf. Mark 1:3; Matt. 3:3; Luke 3:4). Inherent in this use of the Old Testament is the implication that Christ is the true Messiah and Christianity is the true religion only if it can be shown that the prophecies of the Jews were fulfilled and realized in the new movement. This is a view that is shared in varying degrees by all the writers of the New Testament. Some make more copious use of the Old Testament than others, but all share in the common conviction that Judaism was the true line of ancestry for Christianity.

There are also a number of explicit acknowledgments of the validity of Israel's election in the New Testament. Jesus made his assertion that "salvation is from the Jews" to the Samaritan woman. The Samaritans had established a rival temple and rival worship; though Jesus insisted that the time had come for the abolition of the worship both in Samaria and in Jerusalem, he also insisted that the primary channel of salvation had come through the Jews. Paul asked what the advantage of the Jews over the Gentiles was (Rom. 3:1). His answer was: "Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews are entrusted with the oracles of God" (v. 2). The writer of Hebrews insisted that the God who had spoken with finality in Jesus Christ was the same God who had spoken to the fathers by the prophets (Heb. 1:1-2).

Finally, the conviction of the Christians that Judaism was a true ancestor is seen in the fact that the major theological insights of Judaism were adopted and made the foundation of Christian theology. In answer to the question of the scribe about the first commandment, Jesus said, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength'" (Mark 12:29-30). This quotation summarizes the theology of Israel. God is one; a proper relation to him is moral and spir-

itual. Christian preachers adopted these assertions as basic to all theology. They never argue their truth: they are accepted as a part of the *givenness* of their religion.

In all these ways, the validity of Israel's claim to being God's chosen nation was accepted, indeed insisted upon, by Christian writers. This does not mean, as we shall see, that Christians thought of themselves as mere reformers of Israel. True, they rejected the rabbinic accretions to the Old Testament and had much to say about that which was false in the current practices of Judaism. However, they believed that Christianity was something new, that the ministry of Christ had brought into time an eschatological movement of God, that Judaism was meant to be preparatory and had passed away as the channel of God's grace. But in it all, they retained their belief that God had really chosen Israel, that he had really revealed truth to Israel, that the true line of God's mighty acts of redemption was to be traced in the history of Israel.

Why was Israel chosen? The answer to this question cannot be found in Israel; it must be sought in God. Paul describes the focal point of God's selection in the words, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (Rom. 9:13). When he seeks to explain this choice of Jacob over Esau, expressed in this verse in colorful Semitic hyperbole, he insists that the explanation must be found in the election of God. It happened, he said, "though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call" (Rom. 9:11). The major contribution of the excellent work by H. H. Rowley<sup>2</sup> is his insistence that election is always to service, that it is always extended in the light of the task for which God chooses an individual or a nation. We have seen how this worked in the case of Assyria. Chosen as the instrument of God's judgment, that nation is rejected and judged for its wickedness once its task is completed. When we turn to the election of Israel, we need to expect to find the same principle operating. True,

Israel's election was unto honor and was attended by divine privileges. Yet, the main concomitants of Israel's call were not found in her privilege but in her duty and responsibility to God.

When we ask what the task of Israel was, we find the answer in the two major necessities that faced God in his purpose to save the world. He had to reveal himself to man; he had to deal with the problem of sin. Israel served, first of all, as the vehicle through which God could make himself known. This he did, according to the writer of Hebrews (Heb. 1:1-2), in many ways and in many portions. The story of Israel, in the main, is the story of her reception of divine revelation through the mighty acts of God, through the practice of her religion, and through the words of the prophets. Though it is to be recognized that this revelation was preparatory and incomplete, yet it was necessary as preparation for the climactic revelation of God in Christ. The record of this revelation is to be found in the pages of our Old Testament, but the extent of it was not limited to Israel herself. Through the events of history (integrated, we believe, by the power of God into his redemptive purpose), Israel was dispersed among the nations of the world and her knowledge of God was shared with the nations, at least partially. Thus, the revelation by God of himself to Israel not only prepared his people to understand and accept the full revelation of God in Christ; it also prepared the way for the acceptance of the Christian gospel among the Gentiles of the world.

Primarily, however, the ultimate purpose of God in choosing Israel was the preparation for and the human means by which he might send his Son into the world. The writer of Hebrews sees but a faint foreshadowing of the ultimate sacrifice for sin in the rites of Judaism (Heb. 9:8-9). Israel did not always understand that her service to God was limited thus; she often acted as if God were dependent on her to perform his redemptive acts. Nonetheless, both the Old and the

New Testaments agree in teaching that Israel's ministry was pointed toward something higher and better and ultimate.

It is this fact which explains the fact that Israel, *as a nation*, has lost her election. When the goal of the law had been reached in Christ (Rom. 10:4), Israel failed to recognize the hand of God and to submit herself to the new movement. It is true that many individual Jews left the nation and became Christian; it is true also that the nation as a whole continued its course under the guidance of the Pharisees and the rabbis and departed from the main stream of God's purpose. This created a problem in the first century and still vexes the minds of some who have not viewed Israel's election in the light of her task. The question was, How could Christianity be the true religion when Israel was left out? The major treatment of this problem in the New Testament is found in Rom., chs. 9 to 11, a section that some persons view as the central section of Romans. One author who holds this view asserts that Romans was Paul's attempt "to reconcile his doctrine of universal Christian salvation with the inherent Jewish claims of priority to the Messianic promises."<sup>3</sup> Whether this is true or not, the letter does recognize that the failure of the majority of the Jews to accept the Christian message and receive salvation presented a real problem.

Let us look briefly at these chapters. But before we do, let us remind ourselves that the subject under discussion is the theology of history, not the doctrine of individual salvation. Much damage has been done by the failure of some scholars to recognize this fundamental distinction. First, Paul recognizes and states the problem (ch. 9:1-5). Next he shows that the present situation does not mean that the word of God has failed. Election was never automatic or based on mere physical descent (ch. 9:6-13). Next, Pharaoh is used as an example of how God chooses various instruments for his special purposes, and it is asserted that such election is always determined by the sovereign choice of God (ch. 9:14-18). This means that

no man or nation has the right to question God's assignment of its place in history; the purpose of the whole process is "in order to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles" (ch. 9:23-24). This really concluded the argument of Paul for the sovereign freedom of God in ordering the structure of history as he pleases. The whole reason for all that God has done is to be found in the establishment of the Christian religion.

Having settled the question of Israel's claim on God, Paul proceeds to a discussion of why the individual Jews have not been included in the blessings of Christianity. The answer is found in their case, as with all others who are excluded, in their refusal to seek the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ. They had sought it through works of human merit, which must always fall short of the achievement of acceptance with God (chs. 9:30 to 10:21).

Does this mean, then, that God has rejected his people, that they have no hope? No, Paul asserts; it means that they do now have hope, but it is a hope that must be realized through integration into the Christian movement and not through stubborn insistence upon their corporate rights. That Jews, as well as Gentiles, are included in the new election of God is shown by the fact that a remnant, among whom Paul counts himself, have actually been saved. This is in harmony with God's historical dealings with his people since the days of Elijah and does not in any way violate his election of Israel (ch. 11:1-10). Further, the acts of God in Israel constitute the true tree of salvation. Its roots are in Israel; Jews have a natural right to partake of it. They have been broken off (because of their unbelief) and others grafted in, but the devout hope of Paul is that this will lead to the turning of the Jews as a whole to the new election, the new religion, so that they once again may be grafted into the tree of faith and integrated into



the purpose of God (ch. 11:11-32).

All this means that the election of Israel in the historical purpose of God is over; her task is completed. But the election of grace still stands. The nation now stands in the same class as other nations. She may be used in the same ways that God uses Russia or the United States, but she has no special claim on God; she has no special task to fulfill in the new election. However, the people of Israel are welcome to partake of the fruit of God's redemptive purpose. They may become Christians and as such participate in the new election. This is where the true destiny of Israel is to be found, not in some future re-establishment of the kingdom and the institutions that have already fulfilled their historical function in the purpose of God.

## CHAPTER

## V

### *God's Purpose in Christ*

WHEN THE time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, . . . to redeem those who were under the law." (Gal. 4:4-5.) In these words, Paul asserts the common Christian belief that the ministry of Christ represented the "crowded climax"<sup>1</sup> of history, the belief that Christ represented finality in the redemptive purpose of God in the world. In the Old Testament, as we have noticed, there is a sense of incompleteness, a realization that God is moving toward a climax in his redemptive work. In the New Testament, there is a sense of realization, a deep conviction that the climax has been reached, that God's purpose has been realized. If we are to understand the message of the New Testament, we must understand that the "center of gravity"<sup>2</sup> lay not in the past in the history of Israel, nor in the future in the second coming of Christ, nor above in the transcendent power of God. It lay in the Christ event, in the first coming, in the Messianic and redemptive ministry of Christ on earth.

We find this conviction implicit on every page of the New Testament and stated in unmistakable terms in many passages. In his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, Peter explains the remarkable manifestation of the Holy Spirit by insisting that the disciples were not drunk but that God had moved to send his Spirit on man as he had promised. He asserted, "This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.'" (Acts 2:16-17.) The climax of his sermon comes in

the ringing declaration, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). Since "Lord" was the common name by which Israel knew God, and "Christ" or "Messiah" was the common term under which all the hopes of redemption were gathered by Israel, this declaration insists that in the ministry of Christ, God's redemptive work has reached its climax.

The same truth is evident in the speech of James at the Jerusalem conference (Acts 15:13-21). This conference was held to settle the controversy over the admission of the Gentiles to Christian fellowship. Some insisted that they must first become Jews as well as believers. After much debate, these persons were defeated, and the reason for the rejection of their contention was given by James. Two bases were given. First, it was evident, in the ministry of Simon, that God had "visited the Gentiles" with salvation, "to take out of them a people for his name" (v. 14). Second, this visitation of God upon the Gentiles in the climactic days of his redemption agreed with the prophecy that the "fallen" tabernacle of David would be raised up (v. 16). This raising up of the house of David would result, according to prophecy, in the "rest of men" (i.e., the Gentiles), seeking after God (v. 17). The decision of the council is evidence that the whole Christian community felt that they were living in the days of God's final movement in the drama of redemption.

The writer of Hebrews shows evidence that he shared this belief. As a matter of fact, there is no clearer statement of this element in the faith of the Christians than that which is found in Hebrews. He begins his letter with the assertion that "God . . . in these last days . . . had spoken to us by a Son" (Heb. 1:1-2). The word for "spoken" is in the Greek aorist (past) tense, which indicates that God has spoken with finality to men in Christ, who has the qualities of sonship to God. The God who has thus spoken with finality to men in Christ

was the same God who spoke in various ways and various portions to the "fathers by the prophets" (ch. 1:1). In this statement, the writer is asserting not only that God has spoken with finality in Christ but also that he did not speak with finality to the fathers through the prophets. In the second chapter, the writer deals with the redemptive work of Christ and finds it complete. Four statements are made to emphasize the completeness of the redemptive work of God in Christ: (1) He destroyed the devil (ch. 2:14). (2) He delivered those who were in bondage (ch. 2:15). (3) He has become a merciful and faithful High Priest "to make expiation for the sins of the people" (ch. 2:17). (4) He is constantly able to help those who are tempted to overcome their temptations (ch. 2:18).

In the development of his argument, the writer of Hebrews asserts the superiority of Christ and the finality of his redemption. The main portion of the letter is dedicated to showing that the various priestly functions and sacrifices were "but a shadow of the good things to come" (ch. 10:1). The shadow could not redeem, but Christ could and did. "For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified." (Ch. 10:14.) The result of his redemptive work is found in the "new and living way" that is now open into the "sanctuary" (ch. 10:19-20), and in the "new covenant" that he has established between man and God, a covenant that has superseded the old covenant made through the ministry of Moses (ch. 8:1-10).

These passages are sufficient to show the centrality of this thought in the New Testament. The perfect meeting of God with man, toward which the whole course of history was pointing and moving, has taken place in a single Person. From this time on, the center of history is to be found here; the whole movement of the future will start here. In this sense the coming of Christ "completes the Biblical history and seals its character as a course of meaningful events which are the 'mighty acts' of God, and also his 'word' to men."<sup>3</sup>

This conviction is what is meant by the modern teaching of "realized eschatology," a term that had its origin in the writings of Dr. C. H. Dodd, but a teaching that finds its beginning in the New Testament. The Greek word *eschatos* (i.e., last) has two meanings. One, the ordinary meaning of the English word "last," has a temporal sense: "the last in a series of events." The other and more common meaning in the New Testament is qualitative. *Eschatos* in this sense means "that which takes on the nature of absoluteness, of finality; an event toward which other events are pointing; an event that has absolute significance, no matter how many events may come after." Unfortunately for the lay reader, the English word "eschatology" is used in both senses, and this often leads to confusion. Eschatology in the temporal sense is a study of the "last things," the end of the world, the coming of Christ, the resurrection of the body, the judgment, and the eternal order. Eschatology in the qualitative sense is a study of the "first things," the things of eternal significance, the things that changed the world rather than ended it, the things that need no improvement and cannot be superseded. In this qualitative sense, the redemptive ministry of Christ is the true eschatological event, the movement of God that changed the world and established his spiritual rule in the hearts of men, the event from which all future history gains its start and is given its meaning.

In order to understand the New Testament from this standpoint, it is necessary to make a distinction between the "objective" and "subjective" aspects of God's redemptive purpose. Objective redemption is that which is experienced in man. Objectively, God's redemptive work is completed and done; it never needs repeating; it cannot be improved on; it cannot be superseded; it took place in the ministry and work of Christ. Subjectively, God's redemptive work is never finished so long as the world stands; it must be repeated in the heart of each individual who comes to experience it; it needs

to be improved in the apprehension of those who have known it; it takes place in the lives of men and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

We may illustrate this concept by citing the modern victory over the disease of polio. Recognizing that the illustration is not perfect, it remains true that the victory took place, objectively, the moment a vaccine was discovered that would prevent the disease. Subjectively, it takes place in the life of each individual when he is vaccinated and his body is safeguarded against the disease. The victory of Christ over sin was perfect; it took place in his victorious death and resurrection. Objectively, sin has been defeated. However, this power must be applied to the life of each believer. The sinner must accept Christ as his own Lord. When he does, the victory over sin becomes a reality in his life. Sin's power is broken subjectively and the way is open for the sinner progressively to realize the ideal of God for himself.

Let us pursue the implications of this thought in a study of the various aspects of redemption in which the ministry of Christ brought finality. First, the revelation of God that was made in Christ was absolute and final. The Gospel of John asserts, "No one has ever seen God; the only Son . . . has made him known." (John 1:18.) The first part of this statement affirms the impossibility of man's ever coming to a true and sufficient knowledge of God through a process of discovery. The second part declares that God has acted to reveal himself, to make himself known, and that this revelation was completed in the person of Christ. Christ has "declared," i.e., made clear, the nature and person of God. The writer of I Timothy declares that "he was manifested in the flesh" (I Tim. 3:18). This verse seems to be an ancient confession of faith used in the Christian communities. It therefore represents the common faith of New Testament Christianity, not the formulation of doctrine by a single mind. Now this does not mean that every man knows God perfectly. It does mean

that such knowledge of God has become a reality in the person of Christ. There is no need in Christianity for priest, temple, or sacrifice. There is no need for the mediation of angel or prophet. The true knowledge of God has already come. It must, of course, be apprehended by men, and the knowledge of God that any individual man has will never be perfect. However, man's imperfect knowledge is not due to a faulty or incomplete revelation; it is due to a faulty and incomplete apprehension of the revelation. We do not need a new and better revelation of God; we need a new and better apprehension of the revelation of God in Christ. All that man will ever know of God, he must know in Christ. This is the faith of the New Testament.

Likewise, the problem of sin in human life was dealt with with finality in Christ. This is so common a faith of the New Testament writers that it must be thought of as the fundamental assertion of the New Testament. Paul asserts: "God, . . . sending his own Son, . . . condemned sin in the flesh." (Rom. 8:3.) Again: "Christ . . . gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father." (Gal. 1:3-4.) These statements may be taken as representative of the whole New Testament. Christ's sacrifice does not mean, of course, that sin is no longer a reality in the world. It still exists in the lives of man, but its power has been broken. The victory has been won over it objectively by the ministry of Christ. Subjectively, the power generated on the cross becomes effective only when the individual man has faith in Christ.

This same truth prevails in the conviction of Christians that Christ has destroyed Satan and his kingdom. Mark is much engrossed with this victory in his Gospel, and he records more exorcisms of demons than any other Gospel writer. A key passage records the accusation of the Pharisees that Jesus cast out demons by the power of Satan. This Jesus denied. "No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, un-

less he first binds the strong man; then indeed he may plunder his house." (Mark 3:27.) By means of this parable, Jesus is reported to have taught that he had "bound" Satan, which gave him the power to cast out the demons. The writer of Hebrews asserts that Jesus partook of flesh and blood so that "he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb. 2:14). John writes that one purpose of the coming of Christ was that he might "destroy the works of the devil" (I John 3:8). This does not mean that the devil is no longer present and active in the world. It does mean that his power was broken. No man can be forced by the devil to sin or to do evil. Yet, to escape the power of Satan, one must submit himself to Christ, and the Christian must be on guard constantly lest he let Satan invade his life and destroy him. However, the war is won even though the battle continues. Just as "pockets of resistance" remained after the surrender of Japan in World War II, so the "mopping up" against Satan must continue in the lives of God's people.

Finally, Jesus established a perfect fellowship between God and man. "Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ." (I John 1:3.) The possibility of such fellowship with God is open to every man through the ministry of Christ; it is realized, however, only by those who are saved and who walk "according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8:4). This is the conviction of the Christian faith that is gathered up in the phrase "the priesthood of every believer." The Christian fellowship with God is the realization of the ideal of God's people that is found in the Old Testament. God said to the people of Israel, "You shall be to me a kingdom of priests" (Ex. 19:6). However, the disobedience of Israel made this impossible, and the establishment of the Levitical priesthood was necessary. In the beginning of the Christian age, the Levitical priesthood was rejected. There was no longer a need for it. The way to God was open to all believers. All have become priests who may approach God for themselves. Objectively, the way to



God is open; subjectively, it must be traveled. Thus, in this aspect of salvation the distinction between the objective and the subjective remains.

However, we must remember that the ministry of Christ is the true eschatological event in the redemptive work of Christ. It is this ministry toward which God moved in ages past, indeed from eternity. "He was destined before the foundation of the world but was made manifest at the end of the times for your sake." (I Peter 1:20.) We must guard ourselves against any false distinction between the ministry of Christ and the redemptive work of God, for "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself" (II Cor. 5:19).

Nothing will ever supersede what God has done in Christ. Nothing need be added to Christ's work. However, the work and achievement of Christ needs application to the lives of men and to the world. How God is moving in our day to accomplish this aspect of his redemptive program will be the subject of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER

## VI

### *God's Purpose in the Christian Age*

**H**ow is the ministry of Christ being continued in our world today? How is God continuing his redemptive work in the world? The answer is to be found *primarily* in God's presence in and action through his churches; this is the testimony of the New Testament writings. This does not mean that God is not creatively present in the world in other ways; it does mean that the focal point of his action is to be sought among his people. We have noticed that God's action in preparing the world for the climactic act of redemption in Christ was found in nature and general history, but that it was focused in the story of Israel, his chosen people. The same thing is true in the Christian age. God's presence may be discerned, by eyes of faith, in history and nature, but the focal point of his action is to be found in his churches.

The truth of this assertion is apparent from the New Testament teachings about the church. Jesus, at the very beginning of his ministry, called a group of men around him to become the nucleus of the new "rule of God" that he had come to inaugurate. He told them that they were the "salt of the earth; . . . the light of the world" (Matt. 5:13-14). He trained them, during his earthly life, in the principles of Christian group action. On the night before his death, he promised that they would receive the Holy Spirit, through whom both he himself and the Father would continue to abide in them in a way that the world could not experience (John 14:15-20). After his resurrection, he gave his first church its marching

orders — marching orders that have been recognized by every true church of Jesus Christ since that day as its own. “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.” (John 20:21.) “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” (Matt. 28:19-20.)

He promised his followers that, in the carrying out of their commission, they would realize his continuing presence with them until the end of the Christian age (Matt. 28:20). His presence was to be mediated to them in the person of the Holy Spirit (John 14:18; cf. v. 16). The Spirit’s presence in them would convict the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment (John 16:8-11). He would endue them with power for their task of bearing witness to the forgiveness of sins which had now become possible through the suffering and resurrection of the Christ (Luke 24:45-49; cf. Acts 1:8). These promises meant that they were the newly elect, the instrument of God’s power to achieve his redemptive purpose in the world. “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide.” (John 15:16.)

The Acts gives constant testimony that the first church accepted its place in the redemptive program of God. Aware of the need for divine power, the people prayed together from the time of Christ’s ascension until Pentecost (Acts 1:14). When Pentecost came, the Spirit also came in power; all the members of the church were filled with the Spirit and began to speak the message of God under the direction of the Spirit (Acts 2:1-4). When challenged to give an explanation, Peter pointed to the promise of God that in the eschatological age, “the last days,” he would pour out his Spirit on all flesh and claim that this manifestation of God’s Spirit fulfilled that promise (Acts 2:14-18). Testimony given was of such power that three thousand souls were added to their number in that

one day (Acts 2:41). The following chapters of The Acts (chs. 3 to 7) are a continuing saga of the life of this first congregation of God's people as it purged itself of internal corruption, overcame dissension, furnished the first Christian martyr, and gave witness with increasing power to the gospel of our Lord.

The election of God, however, was not restricted to that first congregation; it was extended to other like congregations which became the focal point of God's action in their own communities. The church at Antioch illustrates this point. Founded by refugees from the persecution at Jerusalem, this church first broke the race boundary in their testimony for Christ, practiced their religion with such zeal and fidelity that they were nicknamed "Christian," and were led of the Holy Spirit to send out the first foreign missionaries in the new movement (Acts, chs. 11 and 13). They evidently believed that the commission and the promise that Jesus had given to the first church belonged as well to them.

The career of Paul, the master missionary, gives evidence that he considered the churches to be the primary means of God's continuing activity in the world. When he had completed his first evangelistic tour, he returned to the strategic centers to see that the disciple-bands had proper leadership and understood their position of importance in the witness of Christ (Acts 14:21-23). On each succeeding journey, he returned to these same churches to strengthen and encourage them in their ministry before continuing to new centers to evangelize new disciples and found new churches. His letters are addressed to single churches or to groups of churches with common problems to help them to become faithful stewards of the gospel of Christ. He believed that every single church was a "body of Christ" (cf. Rom. 12:5), and that no matter how sinful the church became, it was to be recognized as "the church of God" (I Cor. 1:2). Not that the sinfulness was to be tolerated; it was to be rectified. But the church was still

God's church, still the "body of Christ," still the continuing incarnation of Christ in the world, the primary agency of God's action in its community.

This truth is still valid. The churches of God are the primary agency of God in the redemption of the world. This is sometimes difficult to believe. Some churches are so worldly; some are so split by strife; some are so heretical; some are so unconcerned about the salvation of the world. It would seem to those persons who are weak in faith that we must look elsewhere for the hand of God in our world. However, the pattern established in the New Testament continues in our time. If we seek to see God at work in the world, we must look at the ministry and service of our churches. Each church is still a "body of Christ," a continuing incarnation of the living Lord and a channel for the power of the Holy Spirit. At least each church should be. This is our election, our call from God. If we fail to fulfill this task, if we look upon our call as a call to privilege rather than to responsibility, our election, like that of Israel, will be withdrawn. No particular church is to consider itself indispensable to God. But if some churches are rejected, others will be raised to fulfill God's mission; others will be elected. This has been the testimony of history as well as the witness of the New Testament.

Let us insist on this truth, but we should not forget that God, though working *primarily* through his churches, works in other ways as well. There are times, no doubt, when the life of a single individual may have great redemptive significance for the world. This was true in New Testament times in the lives of Paul, Peter, and others. It has been true in Christian history in the lives of such men as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and William Carey. It is probably true in our own day that God has laid his hand on particular men in a special purpose. However, the normal redemptive plan of God is for the service of the individual life to be channeled through the ministry of a local church. It is certainly true

that the New Testament gives no instance of any Christian ignoring the fellowship of other Christians in the service of God. Even the great leaders directed their efforts toward the establishment and strengthening of these first redeemed and redemptive societies. Also, the major impact of lives of great men in history has been felt primarily when their service was channeled through the local societies of God's people in their own day. The admonition of Paul to the Philippians is valid for every Christian community: "Let your manner of life be consistent with the gospel of Christ; that whether I come and see you or must remain away, I shall hear of your affairs and know that you are standing true to Christ in one united spirit and are striving shoulder to shoulder for the faith of the gospel." (Phil. 1:27; my translation.)

What we have said about the primacy of the churches does not mean that we are to surrender our belief that God is at work in the historical order also. Although we cannot always discern the finger of God in the movements of history and the events of time, we may be sure that God is still governing his world for redemptive ends. There are times when the eyes of faith may discern the redemptive significance of past events. One would have to be blind to fail to see how significant for the progress of Christianity some events have been. The shift of the center of civilization to the West, the rise of the United States, the decay of heathen culture, have all meant much in preparing the way for the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We may be sure that the creative power behind the scenes of history which has brought these things to pass is the living God. Even in the present, the emergence of the African nations, the social revolutions taking place in the world, and the shrinking of the world into one community must have redemptive significance. The eye of the believer can see ways in which these movements of history may truly be revolutionary in the redemption of man. He cannot and must not attempt to interpret each individual event, for his discernment

is so imperfect that in the end it can only encourage him to believe that God is truly at work in the world. The man of faith rests content with such faith and faces the future unafraid because of his confidence in the creative presence of God in the world order.

He is also aware that political, economic, and sociological movements, no matter how extensive and salutary they may be, cannot in and of themselves have great redemptive significance. If all the world were at peace and there were no threat of war, if all poverty were abolished and men everywhere had plenty, if all prejudice were banished and all men were recognized as equal — this in and of itself would not produce the salvation of a single soul. It takes the preaching of the gospel to do that. Such results could be useful in opening the way for the preaching of the gospel and for the effective ministry of the churches of Jesus Christ throughout the world. Because this is true, the Christian devoutly hopes for, prays for, and works for changes in the right direction in our social structure. But the major emphasis must never be in this direction. If we are to participate in the redemptive work of God, we must find our place in the effective ministry of his churches in the world.

In our discussion of methods, we must not lose sight of God's purpose in our age. He seeks the salvation of men; this is his primary concern, overshadowing all else. The final and complete ministry of Jesus Christ has made possible the salvation of all the world. The continuing action of God in the world is meant to make actual the salvation of as many as possible. The faith of the New Testament is that God is not willing that a single person should perish (II Peter 3:9). The writer found in this fact the explanation of the delay in the coming of Christ. We may find in it the secret of all of God's action in our world. We are challenged by this truth to hold firm to our faith in the continuing and creative presence of God in the world order. We are challenged to seek out that place of serv-

ice where God can most effectively use our lives in his purpose. We are challenged to join forces with one another in church life, developing the kind of churches that can be effective channels of God's power. We are challenged to keep faith with God in seeking to achieve the primary purpose of our being in the world — the salvation of the earth and those that dwell therein.



## CHAPTER

## VII

### *God's Purpose in the Consummation of the Ages*

**T**HERE IS a forward look in the New Testament as well as a backward look. The faith of Christians in the finality of Christ and his work is a clear, shining light on the pages of the New Testament. But the New Testament writers believed that the ultimate realization of God's redemption would be beyond history. They looked forward to and expected the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the judgment of the world, and the eternal order when God's rule would be perfect.

Some would deny that such belief is an integral part of the Christian faith, asserting instead that such statements as we have about it are the residue of Jewish superstition and were denied by later Christian writers. However a study of the New Testament reveals that this belief is an integral part of Christian theology, a common belief of all the Christian writers. Jesus promised his disciples that he would "come again" and receive them unto the place prepared for them, so that "where I am you may be also" (John 14:2-3). Matthew records the teaching of Jesus that all nations would stand before him in final judgment (Matt. 25:31-36). The early church believed that God would send Jesus Christ, "whom heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets" (Acts 3:21). Paul preached that there was a divine order in resurrection: "Christ

the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (I Cor. 15:23-26). The writer of Hebrews insists likewise that the present reign of Christ will continue until all enemies are destroyed (Heb. 10:13). He also says, "As it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him." (Heb. 9:27-28.) John sees the final appearance of Christ as the culmination of the Christian experience, saying, "Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (I John 3:2).

The Revelation is famous for its pictures of the end of time and the final coming of Christ. This teaching must be accepted as a part of the basic faith of Christians.

On the other hand, it must not be elevated to the place of primacy. The first coming of Christ was not only first in time; it is primary in importance in the redemptive action of God. All that we have said in Chapter V indicates the truth of this statement. Man's redemption was completed in the Messianic ministry of Christ on earth. All that will ever come in the life of man is secured there. We must never become so preoccupied with thoughts of heaven that we fail to preach the gospel. We must never become so caught up in speculations about last things that we lose sight of the primacy of the first things.

It does not lie within the scope of the purpose of this work to discuss with anything that approaches completeness the teachings of the New Testament about the future life. Here, we are tracing the great drama of redemption, which began

in creation and comes to its culmination in heaven. The questions that occupy the minds of many persons are outside the scope of our purpose. Many of these questions cannot be answered on the basis of New Testament data. There seems to be a rather clear-cut picture of the main events in the final acts of redemption. First, there will be a final appearance of Christ before the eyes of men. In contrast to his first advent, the second will reveal him in all his glorious reality (Rev. 1:7), will not be connected with the purification of sins (Heb. 9:28), and will cause unrestrained sorrow and fear on the part of some (Rev. 1:7) and glorious exultation on the part of others. Second, there will be a resurrection of all the dead (John 5:28-29), of both those who have done evil and those who have done good in this life. Third, there will be a final judgment of all men — a passing of divine sentence based on the life we live on the earth and a revelation to each individual of the reason for that sentence (Matt. 25:31-41; Rev. 20:11-15). Finally, there will be an assignment of everlasting destiny to all men. Some will be forever banished from the presence of God and will be punished in hell (Matt. 25:46; Rev. 20:15). Some will be welcomed into the presence of God, where they will experience everlasting bliss (Matt. 25:34; Rev. 21:1-7).

It needs to be remembered that the main concern of the New Testament writers was with the culmination of redemption in heaven. Though there is no evidence for universalism in the New Testament, there is a constant preoccupation with redemption rather than with punishment. The life that the redeemed will experience in heaven is described in the most glowing terms in line with the most exalted and most pleasant experiences of this life. Heaven will be like mansions (John 14:2), like a great city (Rev. 21:1-7), like a beautiful garden (Rev. 22:1-2), like the experience of worshiping God in a perfect temple (Rev. 21:22). Sometimes it is described negatively. The sad experiences of this life will have no place

there. No tears, no death, no parting, no sin — these are ways in which human beings must always picture the perfect life.

The emphasis, in it all, is not on a literal description of the joys of heaven — perhaps no such description could ever be adequate. The emphasis is upon the fact that, at last, the dream of God for mankind will be realized in heaven. This is indicated by both the comparison and the contrast of heaven with the Garden of Eden and man's first estate.

Genesis tells us, in poetic language, that after the creation of the physical universe came the creation of man in the "image of God" (Gen. 1:27). When all else was in readiness, God created man as a "living being" and provided for his enjoyment of life and development of character by preparing for him a garden. "And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed." (Gen. 2:8.) Remember that the figure of a garden was especially meaningful to the writers of the Bible: they lived in a dry, arid land where rain was scarce, and dreamed of gardens with delightful trees and plenty of water as ideal dwelling places. As a matter of fact, the imagery of the Bible has been caught up in our own language, and "Eden" has become the name for the idyllic life, for paradise. This figure is caught up also in the description of heaven in The Revelation. "Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations." (Rev. 22:1-2.)

Another figure of the ideal life is caught up in the Revelation passage — that of the tree of life. It is said in Genesis that this tree was planted by God in the "midst of the garden" (Gen. 2:9). However, there is no record of man's eating of its fruit. Rather, when sin came, God drove man out of the garden and posted the "cherubim, and a flaming sword which

turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life" (Gen. 3:24). The implication is that if man should eat of the tree of life in his sinful estate, he would be doomed to perpetual life in this imperfect world. Heaven, however, signals the renewed access of man to the tree of life. "On either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month" is found (Rev. 22:2). The description is deliberately designed to emphasize the accessibility of the "tree of life" — it is planted on either side of the river — and its continued availability for food since it is said to yield its fruit each month. It seems certain that the writer of The Revelation had in mind a description of heaven that would emphasize the restoration to man of the glories of life that he had forfeited through sin.

This implication is further strengthened by the description of the fellowship that will exist in heaven between God and his redeemed people. In the Garden of Eden, it is implied, God made a habit of "walking in the garden in the cool of the day" (Gen. 3:8), a walk in which man shared the fellowship of God. However, this fellowship was forfeited by sin. The Biblical story, as we have pointed out, is engrossed with the redemptive purpose and action of God in providing for the restoration of that fellowship on a new and higher plane. This motif is caught up in the description of heaven in The Revelation: "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them." (Rev. 21:3.) "And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb." (Rev. 21:22-23.) "There shall no more be anything accursed, but the throne of God and the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall worship him; they shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads." (Rev. 22:3-4.) All these expressions point to a closeness and beauty of fellow-

ship with God that is the aim of the redemptive purpose of God now being worked out in the world.

The "new heaven" is not to be a replica of the old "Eden." Not only do we find elements of comparison; we also find elements of contrast that point to the fact that heaven is more than a restoration of a former estate of man; it is a redemption to the ideal life. For one thing, "the first heaven and the first earth had passed away" (Rev. 21:1). This earth is that in which we now live — an earth, according to the Genesis story, accursed because of the sin of man (Gen. 3:17-19); an earth characterized by trouble, sorrow, death, travail, and longing for the redemption of man so that it might share in that redemption (cf. Rom. 8:22-23). The old earth is one that is fit for man to live in in his sinful life; it may even be an arena of redemption. But it is not the site of the ideal life. This site calls for "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21:1).

This superior glory of the new life in heaven is further emphasized by the fact that "there shall no more be anything accursed" (Rev. 22:3). "Nothing unclean shall enter it." (Rev. 21:27.) This is a marked change from the garden of Genesis, which had in it "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:9) and was subject to the invasion of the subtle temptation of the devil (Gen. 3:1). These things were the instruments of man's downfall, but no such things will be allowed to corrupt the life of the redeemed in the new heaven of God.

This same truth is further emphasized by the implications of the permanence of man's life in the new heaven: "They shall reign for ever and ever" (Rev. 22:5). This statement of the eternal enjoyment of the pleasures of life is in marked contrast both with the life of the first man in the Garden of Eden and with the life of man upon the earth. The first man was put in the garden, but a threat was pronounced: "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of

the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen. 2:16-17). Man did eat of that tree; he was cursed with death and sorrow and pain as a result of it (Gen. 3:16-19). Man on earth since that day has tasted of the fruit of sorrow that grows out of the reign of sin. Jacob could say, "The days of the years of my sojourning are a hundred and thirty years; few and evil have been the days of the years of my life." (Gen. 47:9.) Job could cry out, "Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble." (Job 14:1.) All men who have lived on earth have experienced the frustrating fact that trouble and sorrow lurk in the wings of our life even in the midst of our greatest joys. Every exalted moment is darkened by the shadow of the realization that it cannot last forever. This will not be true in heaven. Heaven is forever. There is no end to joys and bliss there.

Finally, the contrast between the new and the old is emphasized in the fact that man's character in heaven will be crystallized in righteousness. The first man was made a candidate for righteousness; he was innocent but not righteous. His character needed maturing and developing, which it never achieved because of the entrance of sin into human life. The redemptive purpose of God has been aimed at bringing fallen man to a righteousness of character, a righteousness that always seems beyond our reach, even though we have been saved by the grace of God. This will not be true in heaven. The description of heaven in the New Testament implies that we will be perfect in our heavenly life. "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and every one who loves and practices falsehood." (Rev. 22:14-15.) At last God's dream shall be realized. The redeemed shall be righteous and dwell in eternal fellowship with the Holy God.

This is the faith of the Bible, the true Christian faith. God has not given up; he will not fail; redemption both has been and will be achieved. The mover of all history is God. The aim of all history is redemption. This is what we believe to be true.



## CHAPTER

## VIII

### *God's Purpose and Evil*

**H**OW CAN evil be a reality in a world ruled by a good God? This question constitutes one of the main objections to the belief set out in this book — the belief that God is governing his universe for redemptive ends. We are told that evil would be impossible in a world ruled by a sovereign God. Either God could prevent evil and does not, or he cannot prevent it, so it is claimed. The presence of evil in the world is a real problem to the faith of the Christian — this must be admitted. We believe that God created the world, that nothing came into being apart from his power; yet we find sin and suffering existing in the world. We believe that God rules the world and is working out a redemptive purpose in history; yet, seemingly, some evil thing often blocks the achievement of good in our lives and in our community. Is there an answer? We believe that, though a full and complete answer may be impossible, it is possible to discover in the Bible some modifying elements in the situation. It is possible to find truth that will relieve the tension to the extent that the man of faith may maintain his faith in the sovereign control of God in the fact of the existence of evil.

We will seek to establish two theses in this chapter. First, concerning the origin of evil, we hold that God is responsible for creating the kind of world in which the introduction of evil was possible, but that man is responsible for the actual introduction of evil into the world. Second, concerning the continued presence of evil in the world, we believe that God

controls and uses evil for the accomplishment of his redemptive purpose.

The presence of evil in the world cannot be denied. Pharaoh asked Jacob, "How many are the days of the years of your life?" (Gen. 47:8). Jacob told him the number of his years and added, "Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life." Many a man has been forced to conclude that his life upon the earth is short and full of evil. Some men, in their more optimistic moments, have thought that life is one continuous stream of good and joy; but inevitably some evil or sorrow comes to destroy this illusion and reminds them of the evil of life. The pessimist who says, "This is the worst possible world," often seems more right than the optimist who says, "This is the best possible world." It is true that much evil is in the world. There are evils that come from the calamitous workings of nature through storm, quake, flood, famine, and disease. There are evils that arise through the struggle for existence and the maintenance of family life. There are evils that we inherit and that other persons bring upon us. There are evils that arise from man's organized life in the community—industrial strife, depression, war. A mere listing of the evils that man must face inclines one toward pessimism. True, no man faces or endures all possible evils in his life, but a thinking man must walk through life with a troubled heart, knowing that evil is with him always and everywhere. There is no need to deny the existence of evil.

Nor can it be denied that the presence of evil in the world creates a problem for the man of faith. Actually, it is faith in God that makes evil a problem of thought. Men tend to reason that if God is sovereign and if he is good, evil would be impossible in a world that he created and rules. There are, of course, two easy solutions to the problem of evil; the atheist and the deist have no problem here. The atheist denies the existence of God altogether and sees evil as the product of the forces of nature and the struggles of man. Evil may be, for

him a practical problem, but it creates no problem for his thought because he sees it as the natural outcome of things as they are. The deist asserts that God is not interested in this present evil world, or at least that he is not involved in it. God created the world and left it to run itself; evil is only the natural outcome of the world. But these solutions cannot be ours; we believe that God is and that he is involved in the historical order. We have asserted that God is working out a redemptive purpose in the world. We might say, as some have, that God is doing his best in an evil world, that he is in no way responsible for the evils of life, and that he is limited by the external circumstances that surround our lives. We cannot even say this and be true to the Biblical thought of God; this would limit God in a way that is not warranted by the Bible. The Bible teaches that God is good and that he rules the universe. If this be true, we must find some way of reconciling this truth with the presence of evil in the world, or our belief in the goodness, wisdom, and justice of God will be seriously affected. We think it is possible to make such a reconciliation. The presence of evil in the world is consistent with the Biblical belief in the rule of God. We may not, indeed we cannot, solve the problem entirely; we can know enough about evil to make it possible to maintain our faith in God in spite of it.

First, let us recognize that the possibility of evil is necessary in a moral world, i.e., a world where choices between good and evil are a reality. A world in which there was no possibility of evil would be devoid of such choices and would have no possibility of moral development on the part of its inhabitants. Evil need not become a reality, but it must always be a live option in a moral world. This is why we can believe that God created a world in which evil was possible, without surrendering our belief in the goodness of God. God was limited in his creation of man in two ways. If he was to create a man who could love and honor him, he had to create

him with a free choice, a will that would make it possible for him to turn against God if he chose. If he was to create a man with such freedom, he had to create him as a candidate for goodness.

We have already noticed that God did create man with the capacity for fellowship with God. God's desire in creation was to bring man into loving and voluntary fellowship with himself. This meant that man had to have freedom of choice, that he had to be given the power to reject God. God is not seeking some kind of forced devotion from man. If he had desired such devotion, he could have found it; but he could not have found it in the kind of creature we know as man. Forced devotion is not fellowship; it is enslavement. It follows that in creating man for such fellowship, it was necessary to create man with the power of choice. He had to be given the opportunity and responsibility of determining his own destiny voluntarily. A man with such power and responsibility had to be given the power to destroy himself. He had to have the power to make choices that would lead in the opposite direction of God's desire for his life. God had no alternative if he was to create the kind of world in which we live; he had to allow for the possibility of evil through the contrary choice of man.

It is also true that, if God was to create man with the power of choice, he had to create him with an unrealized character. A free moral agent could not be created with a perfected and realized moral character. Character must be developed in the crucible of moral action; man had to be given the opportunity to face temptations, to make decisions, and to realize his own destiny. God did not reduplicate himself when he created man in "his own image"; he only invested man with certain of those qualities of God which made it possible for man to have fellowship with God. God's desire, no doubt, was that man would always make the right choices, that he would face temptation and overcome it, that he would develop his char-

acter into true godlikeness. If man had followed the desire of God, the actual introduction of evil into the world would never have happened. We are not saying that evil is a necessity in a moral world; we are only saying that the possibility of evil is necessary.

The presence of evil in the world is not to be found, then, in God's decision to create the kind of world in which we live; it is to be found in man's decision to reject the rule of God in his own life. The immediate cause of sin and suffering is man's decision, not God's work. The Biblical faith is that all the evils which befall man, even those that arise through the maladjustments of nature, come as a result of man's sinful decisions. Certainly, many evils are directly traceable to this fact. Economic depression, crime, graft, greed, and war are the result of human sin and not of divine providence. For instance, we do not fear a nuclear bomb; we do not even fear a good man with a nuclear bomb. What we fear is an evil man with the power to destroy. All the discoveries and advances of science are used either for good or evil according to the nature of the man or men who control them.

Sin and suffering in a moral world, then, is really the perversion of the good. The writer of Genesis records that God, having surveyed all that he had made, pronounced it "very good" (Gen. 1:31). God's pronouncement did not mean that his creation had the quality of moral goodness, but that it was good for the purpose for which it was created. It was good and would produce good if used rightly. Even in the world of nature, though knowledge is too limited to be dogmatic, it may turn out that evil is the result of man's misuse of natural forces. This may be difficult to understand when we think of storm and flood and quake, but there are recent indications that even these mighty calamities of nature are the result of man's failure to understand and obey the rules of the natural order. Scientists at least suspect that drought, flood, and famine are traceable to wrong methods of tilling the soil

and conserving the water supply in many areas of the world. We can at least hold our judgment in abeyance until further knowledge reveals whether or not natural calamities come aside from the errors of man. In the realm of moral and spiritual evil, we do not have to doubt. Evil has no independent existence; it has no reality aside from the choice of man. Sin is always man's misuse of God's providential provisions for man's life on earth. There is no way in which it is possible to hold God responsible for the creation of evil or for its actual introduction into human life.

Yet, God knew that evil would come. He planned from eternity what his redemptive program would be. Why did God create the world in the face of his knowledge? The Christian answer must always be that God created the world with the salvation of man in his mind. Using a human analogy, we would say that God weighed the evil against the good that could be gained and decided to create the world in spite of his knowledge that evil would result. The necessity of enduring evil to achieve good is a common experience of man. For instance, man's happiest estate is marriage; but when a man marries he takes a chance on the coming of evil into his life. As a matter of fact, it is not a chance at all; evil will certainly attend marriage. Even if the marriage turns out to be a tremendous success, it is inevitable that sorrows and difficulties will be multiplied to a man because he is married. Man knows this. He knows that it is likely that his wife will be sick, and just because he is married to her, her sickness will become a part of his sorrow. He knows that the task of supporting a family will greatly enlarge his responsibilities and deprive him of certain material enjoyments that might otherwise have been his. He knows that if children come, and he desires them, they will bring an added burden of support; they will present a multitude of problems in rearing them, and will cause him heartache and anxiety in the years of their development. Yet, knowing all this, a man will get married.

He does so, presumably, because he feels that the joys and benefits of marriage will more than repay the difficulties and sorrows to be found in it. Perhaps this explains why God created the world in spite of the dreadful knowledge that evil and suffering must come, not only in the world, but in eternity. The good to be gained outweighed the evil and suffering that would come.

This is all to say that the presence of evil and suffering in the world is to be thought of in two ways. God created the kind of world in which the possibility of evil existed; man rebelled against God and evil became a reality in human life. This understanding should relieve the tension in the mind of the man of faith. He will realize that God stands justified in making his choice to create the world, and he will realize that man is responsible for his own suffering. This does not mean that every individual man suffers to the extent, in this world, that he deserves; no man with a keen conscience would deny that he deserves more suffering than he has to endure.

What we have said will help us to understand how God can be good and create a world in which evil becomes a reality; it will not answer the question of how it can be true that God rules a world in which evil is a reality. This question comes to some solution when we realize that God actually uses the evil that is present in the world for the good of man, that there is a redemptive function that evil fulfills and that nothing else could fulfill. This is a bold statement. To say that evil is necessary in our world for the achievement of good is saying much more than to say that the possibility of evil is necessary in a moral world. However, given the fact that man did sin and must be redeemed, this statement can be justified.

Perhaps the function of evil on the natural level should be our starting point. Nature is man's greatest educator; he learns the facts of science because he must if he is to survive. Modern science is the outgrowth of man's effort to discover and obey the "laws" of nature because he has found that dis-

obedience brings pain and suffering. His education began in childhood when he touched something hot and found that it brought pain. He wants to avoid the pain, but he also wants the benefits that heat brings; so he learns to avoid touching anything that is hot. This process of learning continues into mature years; it also accounts for the continued advance of the race in its knowledge of nature. All that man will ever learn of the world in which he lives will be taught him by the world itself. There is no way that man can be forced to invention except by suffering. He invented the wheel because he disliked the discomfort of carrying heavy burdens; he discovered the means of producing artificial light because darkness was unpleasant; he discovered medicine to combat the pain of disease. The advances of science in every age are merely intelligent efforts on the part of man to solve the problems of pain and suffering. Even on the natural level, pain serves man's good by pushing him into advance toward great benefits. Is there any other way that this good could be accomplished?

Much the same thing is true in the realm of social life. Virtues of man as a social being are developed through sharing suffering and difficulties. A man who lived in a world where he did not suffer and where his neighbors did not suffer would never learn to love and give and share; one who missed having these virtues developed in his life would miss living itself. We do not mean that we welcome our own sufferings or rejoice in the sufferings of others; we do mean that suffering produces good. Whether the good outweighs the suffering may be debated; that the evil does produce good is evident.

These thoughts are preliminary to our real concern. They illustrate the more-difficult-to-see fact that God uses evil to accomplish redemptive results in the lives of men. There is a spiritual function that evil fulfills; this would indicate that God can be the ruler of the world even though evil is present in it. One evil, when viewed from the human standpoint, is the judgment of God on sin. There is no way of eliminating this



thought from the Bible, though many have tried to do so. The fact of God's judgment on sin is so completely woven into the fabric of Biblical thought that it is impossible to eradicate it without destroying the Bible. Paul declares, "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men." (Rom. 1:18.) He further asserts, "So each of us shall give account of himself to God." (Rom. 14:12.) The evil results of sin occur both in this life and in the coming world; they come in the lives of both the unsaved and the Christian.

How does this fact serve a redemptive end? For one thing, the knowledge of God's judgment on sin is one of the factors that God uses to bring men to accept salvation. It is one of the fallacies of modern thought that men deny the validity of using fear as a motive for doing right. Certainly fear should not be given the primary place in our religious teachings, but it has its rightful place. It is rather strange to hear one say that we must avoid the use of fear as a religious motivation or we will become narrow and bigoted. This is using fear as a motive to avoid using fear as a motive. In every realm of life, man learns through fear of the results if he does not learn. Why should not the same thing be true in his spiritual life? Whether it should be true or not, it is difficult to imagine that sinful man would seek very seriously to do right if he thought he could continue in sin with impunity. Why seek heaven if there is no hell? Why seek righteousness if sin is not judged? Why seek fellowship with God if lack of that fellowship does not bring unhappiness? It is the very knowledge of the fact of judgment that leads men to forsake sin and to surrender their lives to the love and grace of God, who alone can deliver them not only from the judgment of sin but from sin itself.

This same truth that sin causes suffering is one of the motives by which God develops the Christian character. Of course, suffering affects different men in different ways. It is

only in the lives of men who love God and are called according to his purpose that all things, including suffering, work together to produce good (Rom. 8:28). The same moral constitution of the universe that brings judgment on sin will drive ungodly men deeper into their rebellion against God, but will at the same time draw the Christian into the pursuit of the good life.

We have been taught so often that suffering is not always an indication of sin in the life of the sufferer that some have been led to suppose that it never is. Many times, however, it is true that evils come into the life of an individual or a nation because of the sinfulness of that individual or nation. The Biblical concept of this fact is that God punishes sin. This is true, at least to the extent that God has created a moral order where sin is always punished. We need not think of God as a sadistic tyrant who spies upon men and moves in swift vengeance upon all who offend him. Such an idea would not be true to the Biblical picture of God. But it is true that the moral order in which we live is so constituted that a man cannot sin with impunity. If one indulges in alcohol, he will be cursed with drunkenness and his drunkenness will destroy him. If a nation turns to sinful indulgence, that nation will be cursed with weakness and destruction will come. If a government tyrannically disregards the rights of men and the claims of God, its tyranny will lead to its fall. In many cases it is possible to see the necessary connection between sin and the judgment of God. This is not always so. The Bible teaches that God sends drought and famine on nations that ignore his rights. In any case, we may be sure that the judgment of God, if not always swift, is always sure. In the life of the ungodly, this fact serves only to drive him deeper into the morass of sin and finally to eternal ruin. No good comes to him as a result of his sufferings because he continues to rebel against the God of grace who could and would save him from his sins. We may pity such a man; it is difficult to see

how we can blame God for his trouble. God's desire is that he be saved; suffering is not what he seeks. Sufferings are the unavoidable by-product of God's intense desire to bring men to the full realization of redemption. He may regret that they must happen, but he cannot avoid them if he is to accomplish his purpose.

The real redemptive quality of sufferings and evil is seen in the beneficent effect they have upon those persons who yield themselves to God. Sufferings bring about or at least contribute to that yielding in faith which we have noted; they also act as spiritual disciplinarians in the Christian life. Whether the sufferings Christians endure come as a direct result of their own sin or not, sufferings always drive them to a deeper fellowship with God, to a more intense effort for the salvation of men and the improvement of society. In doing so, sufferings bring about the progressive realization of a Christlike character in Christians. The presence of suffering must needs be. So long as we are imperfect in our quest for righteousness, there must be some system of rewards and punishments to urge us on to a full realization of the perfect character of God in our lives.

For instance, students in school are subjected to a certain discipline by their teachers, not for the sake of punishment of those who will not learn, but for the sake of the development of those who can be brought to learn. Certain regulations of study are imposed; certain rewards for study are offered; certain punishments for negligence are invoked. The reason for this system is that the students are students and not scholars. When one becomes a scholar, he studies for the love of knowledge. He needs no one to force him to his duties; he needs no reward except the reward of learning; he needs no punishments.

The same thing is true in the development of children in the home. Parents are in the habit of imposing certain restraints upon their children and enforcing these restraints with punish-

ment when necessary. This seems necessary for any child. But when a child becomes mature and his character is set in the right direction, such parental discipline is forsaken. Most adults are aware of following more closely the desires of their parents in adulthood than in childhood. This remains true even though parental discipline has long since ended.

Perhaps this is the reason we can think of heaven as a place of perfect and painless bliss. When we have reached the maturity of our spiritual selves, such teachers as pain and death and sorrow will not be needed. For the present, it seems that any kind of world in which they were absent would be disqualified as a field for the development of character. Suppose we knew that no evil would befall us, that life would be like a rosy dream, and that we would never die. Would not all motivation for the creation of good be destroyed by such circumstances? Would not man's character be completely debauched by such assurance? We believe it would be, and therefore we believe that the presence of evil in the world is perfectly consistent with the idea that God rules the world for redemptive ends.

Finally, we would say that God uses evil to bring about the consummation of our redemption. The essence of natural evil is epitomized in death. Most evil and suffering would not be thought unjust or undesirable if it did not bring death. In any discussion of natural evil we must face the reality of death and inquire why men die. The answer to this question becomes apparent when we realize that men must die before they can come to a full realization of redemption. The body is corrupted by sin in the human life just as the soul is; it must be redeemed if redemption is to have its full meaning. The experience of death and resurrection is necessary to the body's redemption. The Genesis account of the fall and failure of man tells us that Adam was shut out of the Garden of Eden to keep him from eating of the tree of life. The implication is that if he ate of the tree of life, he would live forever in

this world. In his sinful state, with his imperfect body, he would be condemned to an eternity of mortality. What the writer is trying to say is that death, which comes upon man as a curse for his sin, comes into the life of the redeemed man as a blessing in disguise. Paul has much the same idea when he speaks longingly of death as the means by which he would come to enjoy his heavenly tabernacle (II Cor. 5:1-2) and debates with himself as to whether he wishes to die, which he recognizes as great gain for himself (Phil. 1:21-23). This same thought is contained in Rom. 8:17-23, which pictures the world of nature as groaning and travailing in vanity, awaiting the final resurrection, when it will share the glorious destiny of the redeemed. In each case, God is trying to tell us that death, though it may be regarded as the ultimate evil by men, is actually the gateway to the ultimate good in the redemptive purpose of God.

These considerations should serve to show how evil can be present in a world that is ruled by a good God. Yet there is more to be said that will help us to reconcile the presence of evil in the world with our conception of the sovereign goodness of God. One of these additional thoughts is that God controls and limits the evil that comes into our lives; he does not let evil come without limitation and control. This is the teaching found in the Old Testament book of Job and the New Testament book of The Revelation. These two books deal with the problem of evil from different viewpoints, but they come to the same conclusion. Job deals with it from the standpoint of the individual who is faithful to God and yet suffers, and comes to the conclusion that God is in control of and limits the evil that comes into the life of the individual. The Revelation deals with the problem of the embattled churches of Asia Minor as they face the dread might of the Roman Empire. This book teaches that God allows evil to continue for a season in such a form, that there is a redemptive purpose in it, but that he will destroy it rather than be de-

stroyed by it. God is pictured to us in the Bible as a wise father who does not unduly interfere with the lives of his children but who does keep a constant watch over them to see that they are not overcome by the difficulties, struggles, and temptations of life.

Another thought that we should add is that life must be viewed in the light of eternity, not in the limited light of life upon this earth. Often an experience that we regard as evil will turn out to be something that is good as we see it over the passage of time. We have all learned that we cannot evaluate the experiences of life accurately without viewing them in the light of the whole life; what we need now to learn is that we must view them in the light of eternity if we would make a really accurate evaluation of them. Many of the things that cause pain in life may very well be the cause of rejoicing in eternity. For instance, a young pastor suffered great persecution and many troubles as leader of one of our churches. At the time, he felt that the most dreadful evil had come into his life. He faced it with courage and faith and overcame it, and in overcoming it he found that the experience in which evil came was one of the joyous experiences of his life. He delights now to remember the evil days, not because of the evil but because of the sustaining grace and power of God, which he came to recognize in his life at that time. When he stands on the battlements of heaven and looks back over his life in the light of eternity, this rejoicing will no doubt be multiplied.

Still another thought we should emphasize is that evil is never the thing that God purposes. Evil is never good except as it produces good in the lives of men, and it is this good which God purposes. If there were any other way by which the good might be accomplished, God would no doubt choose that other way. But since there is no other way, he accepts the evil and works the good through it. We see this fact illustrated in many ways in the Biblical story of redemption.

God purposed the salvation of the world, but the cross was necessary to the achievement of that salvation; therefore, the cross was accepted not for the joy of dying but for the glory of saving. He purposed the spread of the gospel to all nations, but persecution of the church at Jerusalem was necessary to drive the disciples out on their mission; therefore, persecution was allowed and used to accomplish the good. He purposed the use of Paul as a great missionary, but Paul seems to say of himself that he was of such a nature that a constant "thorn in the flesh" was necessary to keep him subservient to the will of God; therefore, the thorn in the flesh was allowed and used (II Cor. 12:7-9). So it is with the experiences of our lives. God wills the good; he allows the evil, but he transforms the evil by his grace and power into an instrument of the good.

The last thing we would say and the note on which we would end this whole discussion of God's purpose in history is that our faith must sometimes accept what our minds cannot verify or explain. All the problems related to the presence of evil in the world become a question of whether we can trust God or not. John says the victory that overcomes the world is faith; faith is the victory (I John 5:4). He does not say that faith brings victory; he says that faith is the victory. As we face the experiences of life and the problems of thought that come to us, if we can rise above our circumstances and limitations and exercise a creative and powerful faith in God, we have already won the victory of life. This is not a call to an irrational belief in the goodness of all things, for we recognize that not all things are in themselves good. It is a challenge to an enduring faith that is based upon the firmest of ground — a consideration of the goodness and sovereignty of God.

*Part Two*

THE PURPOSE OF GOD  
AND THE INDIVIDUAL





## INTRODUCTION

### *God's Concern for the Individual*

THE PURPOSE of God, expressed in election, is not just universal; it is individual as well. Important as the universal design of God is, we must not lose sight of the supreme importance of the individual in the plan of God. There is danger that we may do so. A former age placed so much emphasis upon the individual and upon individualism that our age is in danger of reacting in the other extreme. The modern-day emphasis on collectivism, mass movements, and the social gospel often tends to lose sight of the individual.<sup>1</sup> Even Biblical scholars have become so engrossed in the grand "drama of redemption" that they have lost sight of the truth that redemption must always be the redemption of the individual man. H. H. Rowley, for instance, in what may be the most important modern book on the doctrine of election, excludes the destiny of the individual from his discussion.<sup>2</sup> But a full discussion of the doctrine of election calls for a consideration of the election of the individual to salvation, to service, to glory. Individual election is not derivative; it is primary. God's concern has always been primarily for the individual and his welfare, though man's knowledge of that concern has not always been complete.

This truth is nowhere more evident than in the ministry of Jesus, which was directed toward the needs of the individual man.<sup>3</sup> The ministry of Jesus, no less than his teaching, proved the infinite worth of the individual man in the sight of God.<sup>4</sup> The miracles of healing were directed toward the relief of the

misery and need of individual man. The story of the ministry of Jesus is replete with evidence of his inability to turn away from the cry of need in any heart. The healing of the paralytic (Mark 2:1-12), the man with the withered hand (Mark 3:1-5), the Syrophenician's daughter (Mark 7:24-30), blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52), and many others showed his deep concern and compassion for the needs of men and women. When criticized for keeping company with the social outcasts of his day, he replied, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17). When faced with the reality of true repentance on the part of a single man, he rejoiced and said, "The Son of man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10).

Why this concern on Jesus' part? He viewed it as a simple reflection of the mind of God. He met the criticism that he companied with sinners and publicans by telling the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the two brothers (Luke, ch. 15). The point in each of these parables is the concern of the Father for those who are lost and in need. Christ's own attitude toward the value of a man is shown in his insistence that a man's life is more important than the whole material world (Mark 8:36), that his need is more urgent than the need of animals (Matt. 12:12), and that his welfare is more important than the preservation of religious institutions and customs (Mark 2:27).

In his teaching, Jesus stressed the primary concern of God for the individual man. True worship of God is said to be spiritual because God is Spirit (John 4:24). It is therefore not essentially related to any place, custom, or institution but is the meeting of the sincere soul with the living God. This emphasis is found most forcibly in the teaching of Jesus on the Fatherhood of God. The Jews had thought of God as the Father of the nation; the individual Jew became related to God through the nation. His relation was mediated and de-

relative. Jesus changed the emphasis. God he taught is the Father of the individual believer. Man's relation to God is direct, personal, and primary. He may choose, as a son of God, indeed he will choose, to associate himself with others in the fellowship of the church; but each man is directly and primarily related to God individually. Each man comes to know God and worship him as an individual person, not as a semipersonal entity in a religious institution in which his personal life is obscured.<sup>5</sup> Jesus taught that the Father exercises a minute and personal care over his children; hyperbolically, he exclaims, "Even the hairs of your head are all numbered" (Matt. 10:30). In such statements, Jesus is emphasizing the fact that God knows and cares about the least details of our lives. He did not share the common modern view that God presides over the great affairs of the nation but is uninterested in the concerns of the individual. He believed that, to the Father, nothing that concerned the individual was small or inconsequential.<sup>6</sup>

T. W. Manson pointed out that the whole teaching of Jesus on the Fatherhood of God is summarized in the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13). This prayer, summarizing as it does all that we should ask and desire of the Father, indicates the kind of God we believe in. The prayer may be divided into two main divisions. The first group of petitions—"Hallowed be thy name," "Thy kingdom come," and "Thy will be done"—could be called *world issues*. The second group of petitions—"Give us this day our daily bread," "Forgive us our debts," and "Deliver us from evil"—is concerned with the everyday needs of the individual man. Though this division cannot be pressed too far, Manson is right in thinking that it indicates God's concern for the individual as well as for the affairs of the world. This is what God's Fatherhood in the teachings of Jesus means.<sup>7</sup>

This does not mean that Jesus departed completely from the teachings of the Old Testament; it does mean that he

changed the emphasis from the Jewish concern with the nation to the Christian concern for the individual. The ideas of Jesus corresponded with the heart of the Old Testament teachings. It is commonly thought that the religion of the Old Testament was communal in character, that it dealt exclusively with the corporate personality of Israel. This is not all the truth. The Old Testament has much to say about the individual's relationship with God.<sup>8</sup> The Jewish laws were directed toward the individual man and were formulated in the singular: "Thou shalt not." Many of them dealt with the dignity and worth of the individual by inference. It was wrong to lie about, steal from, kill, or commit adultery with, another person, because no person is unimportant. No individual is to be thought of as a means to an end. He is an end in himself. What Jesus did with the heart of the Old Testament teaching on this matter was to bring it into sharper focus, to stress the fact that God's concern for the individual was primary rather than derivative.

That this emphasis was present in the Old Testament is seen in the enunciation of the new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34), a passage that the writer of Hebrews considered to be a direct prophecy of the heart of the Christian religion (cf. Heb. 8:8-12). The positive features of the new covenant were (1) *inwardness*: "I will put my law in their inward parts"; (2) *individualism*: "All shall know me"; (3) *forgiveness*: "Their sins I will remember no more."<sup>9</sup> Though it cannot be denied that the Jews misinterpreted the teaching of God in such a way that the individual became unimportant, this was never the intention of God.

That this statement is true is seen not only in the teachings of Jesus but in the concern of the Christian community for the individual man. This attitude is reflected by all the writers of our New Testament books. Paul's primary concern was for the salvation of the individual man (Rom. 10:8-13). John emphasized such experiences of life as believing, being born

again, loving one another, etc. All these are experiences that must in their very nature be individual and personal. James's command that the poor man was to be treated with equal respect to the rich man in the meeting of the Christians stresses the same truth (James 2:1-8).

There is no need to belabor this point further; it can be accepted as a primary datum of Biblical theology. We turn now to a discussion of the election of the individual to salvation, to service, and to glory. What has been said in the first part of our work, although important to our understanding of God's purpose in the world, serves as a background for this discussion. The whole sweep of God's redemptive purpose would mean nothing unless it culminated in the salvation of individual men. This salvation, we may safely say, was the primary concern of God from the beginning.

Our method of procedure in this further discussion is worthy of a word of explanation. We will begin with a discussion of God's actual dealings with the individual, first in the salvation of those who are saved and second in the damnation of those who are not saved. This is proper because we have a great deal more data on which to base our discussion here than when we come to discuss the eternal purpose of God. However, we must then attempt to relate the actual dealings of God with men to his eternal purpose. Two methods of arriving at the truth will be employed. First, we will consider the teachings of the New Testament, which are not a few. Second, we will attempt a logical relation between the *given* belief that God does what he does on purpose and the actual result of his dealings with men. We will then consider certain problems that arise in the human mind when it comes to grips with these realities. Finally, we will seek to relate this whole truth to the living of the Christian life in fellowship with God and in submission to his will.

## CHAPTER

# IX

### *Salvation Is of the Lord*

**S**ALVATION IS of the Lord" (Jonah 2:9, KJV) is not just the cry of the ancient prophet; it is the central affirmation of the Bible. This statement is almost universally accepted as axiomatic in Biblical study. Writer after writer has noted that the Bible consistently pictures true salvation as having its source in God,<sup>1</sup> as being the result of God's action,<sup>2</sup> and as being initiated by God's grace, which seeks out man and brings him to respond to God's proffered grace.<sup>3</sup> The truth is so central in the teachings of both the Old and New Testaments it is necessary to consider only a sampling of the passages that teach it. "There is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other." (Isa. 45:21-22.) The psalmist commands his soul to bless the Lord, who is described as the One who forgives iniquities, heals diseases, redeems life, crowns with lovingkindness and tender mercies, and satisfies with good things (Ps. 103:1-5). Paul insists that it is God who has blessed us with all spiritual blessings (Eph. 1:3), and Peter echoes that it is God who has begotten us again to a living hope (I Peter 1:3). Wherever one turns in the Old Testament or the New, the glory of God as savior, redeemer, and helper of men shines forth in pure radiance.

While this truth does not need to be defended, it does need to be elaborated. Only as we take time to view salvation in all its details does the full import of God's grace make itself felt.

It needs to be noted that salvation does not result from a general provision of God in which the saved man co-operates and participates by his own power. Salvation in its entirety is the work of God in the human heart. That man contributes absolutely nothing to his salvation is a constant emphasis of the New Testament. This follows from the absolute sinfulness of man, a truth that is assumed by Jesus (Luke 11:13) and is explicitly taught in many passages. Paul insists that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). His description of the state of the unsaved man in Eph. 2:1-12 is almost beyond belief. He describes man in his sin as being "dead through the trespasses and sins" (v. 1), as under the complete domination of Satan (v. 2), as being "by nature children of wrath" (v. 3), as "having no hope and without God in the world" (v. 12). The whole dark picture of man's sinfulness is meant in this passage to throw into bold relief the truth that "by grace you have been saved" (v. 8). He is saying that since man has sinned against God, he has no merit on which to base a claim for God's help, and since he is dead in sins, he is devoid of any power to break the hold of sin in his life.

Salvation, then, is of the Lord; more, it is by the grace of God. Grace is that term in the New Testament which is designed to describe all that God does for a man as completely unmerited and undeserved. Paul insists that "by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God — not because of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). He is saying that the source of salvation is not man but God; the means of salvation is not works but submission to God in faith. This is a constant emphasis of Paul. The glory of salvation belongs wholly to God and in no degree to man. Man has no ground for boasting. Over and over again, Paul insists, with the greatest plainness of speech, that this is true (cf. Rom. 3:2; I Cor. 1:29; Gal. 6:14; Phil. 3:3; Titus 3:4-5; etc.).<sup>4</sup>



Though the doctrine of salvation by grace comes to its clearest statement in the writings of Paul, it is not exclusively a Pauline idea. James Moffatt points out that "grace" is never put on the lips of the Lord by the Gospel writers but that the idea of grace was implicit in his mission, in his belief that his mission was the fulfillment of the purpose of God, in his conflict with the popular merit-religion of his day, and in his conviction that the "rule of God" was to be inaugurated through his mission.<sup>5</sup> Jesus' answer to the rich young ruler shows plainly that "eternal life" is not the reward of obedience to the Law but is a gift of God to the totally dedicated (Mark 10:13-22). His disciples, amazed at his statement that the rich found difficulty in being saved, asked, "Then who can be saved?" His answer was, "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God." (Mark 10:26-27.) James echoes the teaching of Jesus and the emphasis of Paul when he says, "Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father" (James 1:17).

There is not a single thing in the entire situation that brings about man's salvation which can ultimately be ascribed to human effort or to human production. It is true that man is active in the reception of salvation, that he responds to the grace of God, and that his response is free and voluntary. God does not coerce him into receiving salvation. But his salvation is the act of a gracious God who, in spite of man's sin and unworthiness, moves upon his heart to bring about his salvation in a circumstance created by the merciful providence of God. This is why it can truthfully be said that whenever a man is saved, he is saved by the grace of God. This is evident when we consider the usual and necessary elements in man's salvation.

First, it is God who is responsible for the preaching of the gospel, which arouses man to a sense of his need and points him to the cure of his soul. The work of the witness is the work of God, not the work of men. Paul writes, "Our gospel

came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." (I Thess. 1:5.) The Christians at Pentecost were said to have spoken as the "Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:4). The New Testament preachers, like the prophets of old, spoke with the assurance that their message was the "word of God." Since it is true that men cannot have faith without hearing and cannot hear without a messenger (Rom. 10:14), the preaching of the gospel is an essential element in man's salvation. To the superficial observer, this would seem to be one area where human effort contributes to the salvation of man. That this is not true is seen in the emphasis of the New Testament that such witness, in its ultimate reality, is the work of God, though it may be accomplished in the acts of men.

Second, not only is the work of the witness the work of God, it is also true that God attends the actual witnessing experience with his power to give it effectiveness. Even a Spirit-led witness would be powerless to change a man's heart if his witness were not attended by the working of God in the heart of the hearer to arouse in him a conviction of sin and a desire to be saved. Jesus insisted, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." (John 6:44.) He promised his disciples that after his glorification the Spirit would come to them and that "he will convince the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment" (John 16:8). This promise found its first fulfillment on the Day of Pentecost. The record of that day is illuminating as it tells of the successive acts of the Spirit of God. First, the Spirit came to the church and filled each Christian with power (Acts 2:4). Next, each one spoke as he was led and inspired to speak by the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4). Peter's sermon is given as an example of the preaching of the Christians. At the sermon's conclusion, it is said that those who heard "were cut to the heart" (Acts 2:37), an expression that is evidently meant to point to the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the hearers. As a summary of

the early success of the church in winning converts to Christianity, it is said that "the Lord added to their number day by day" (Acts 2:47), an expression that points to the power of God as the effective power in the ministry of preaching the gospel. The writer of Hebrews recounts the transmission of the gospel from the Lord to his generation of Christians. He says, "It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will." (Heb. 2:3-4.) The whole witness of the New Testament in this respect is that it is the attending power of God that makes the preaching of the gospel, the witnessing of the Christian, effective in the hearts of those who hear.

Third, God creates the faith that makes it possible to receive salvation. Some speak of faith as if it were wholly man's own work, his unaided response to the offer of salvation. This is not the thought of the New Testament. Faith is never viewed in this light. It is true that faith is man's act, the response of his whole being to the offer of God's grace, but "it is not an act performed in man's own strength. It is an act which he is enabled to make."<sup>6</sup> This is suggested in the statement of salvation that Paul makes: "By grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). This verse seems to say that not only the salvation but the means of receiving that salvation, i.e., faith, is the gift of God. The fact that faith is itself a gift of God, God's work in the human heart, is enforced by Paul's use of the word "calling" in his letters. In one passage, Paul traces the grand sweep of man's salvation from eternity to eternity, using five words to do so — foreknew, predestined, called, justified, and glorified (Rom. 8:29-30). "Called" is the middle act of God in this program of salvation. The word, by itself, could point to a general invitation to which each individual man may respond as he will. However, the word is

never used by Paul in this sense; it always has the sense of "effectual calling."<sup>7</sup> It indicates that to the outward invitation, there is added "an invariable and essential element, a corresponding inward feeling produced directly by the contact of the soul with God."<sup>8</sup> What is involved in the thought is that it is God's power and God's power alone which enables the sinner to exercise faith in Christ and to receive the salvation that God provides.

Fourth, God saves the sinner when he responds to grace. This truth is so clearly and so often stated in the New Testament that it scarcely needs mention. All the words that seek to explain what happens to a man in the salvation experience point to the fact that salvation is the work of God in the human heart. Invariably, the words, when used to describe the salvation experience, make God the actor and man the one acted upon. Man is born again, forgiven, justified, reconciled, sanctified, etc., when he accepts the Lordship of Christ in his life. Without exception, the New Testament writers indicate that this experience is due to the effective operation of God in the human heart. It is God who forgives, justifies, reconciles, sanctifies, and regenerates the sinful man and thus makes him a son of God.

Fifth, God is the actor, not only in the initiation of the salvation experience, but in the sustaining of the Christian in his relationship to God. The Philippian Christians are urged to work out their salvation to its full meaning in their lives and are reminded that it is God who works in them to desire and perform his will (Phil. 2:12-13). Peter reminds his readers that they "by God's power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (I Peter 1:5). Jesus believed that the effective reason why his sheep would "never perish" is that "no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" (John 10:28-29). Paul's assurance rested in the fact that "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed

unto him against that day" (II Tim. 1:12, KJV). This does not mean that the Christian is preserved without his own effort; it does mean that it is the power of God that enables him to stand true to Christ throughout his life. This is the basis of one's assurance that God not only saves but keeps his children.

Thus we see that the entire transaction in which man is saved is to be ultimately referred to the grace of God. Man is saved by the grace of God and by this alone. This thought creates a problem in our minds. Does it mean that man is wholly passive, that he is never acting in the experience of his own salvation? No. What, then, does it mean? Perhaps the answer is to be found in making a distinction between "work" and "act." This is a difficult distinction to make, for it is usually thought that the results of a man's acts are his works. This, however, is seldom true in ordinary matters and is never true in spiritual matters.

For instance, the farmer acts in preparing the ground and sowing his seed, but the abundance of the yield is determined by factors outside the farmer's power — the fertility of the soil, the coming of rain, and the energy of the sun. True, no crop would come aside from the farmer's acts, but when the crop does come, it is largely the effect of other factors. Likewise, the doctor may diagnose a disease, prescribe a medicine, or perform an operation, but these acts do not heal. Healing comes from other factors — from the power of nature, which is really the power of God. There is scarcely a thing a man does that he does alone without outside causes contributing to the results of his acts. The student is enabled to learn by his teacher; the businessman is dependent on the community for his profits; the statesman is dependent on his country.

However, the work of God in the human heart is more than this. In ordinary pursuits a man may isolate his contribution to the end result of his actions and believe that he, in and of himself, was a causative factor in the result. He cannot do

this in his salvation experience. Ultimately, it is impossible for any man to isolate any contribution that he, *in and of himself*, makes to his salvation. Everything is due to the grace of God. Man contributes nothing to his own salvation. There is not a single causative contribution from any human source to his salvation — it is all and only by the grace of God. Nevertheless, man is active in the reception of salvation. In no sense of the word can man be thought of as a lump of clay that is molded as the potter wishes. Though he is acted upon, he is active in the experience of God's power.

Admittedly, this is a mystery; it cannot be explained. What it means essentially is that man never acts independently of God in the achievement of any true spiritual result. It is God who takes the initiative in all of man's good works, and it is the power of God, permeating and indwelling man's being, that enables man to act in a way that becomes spiritually significant.

Perhaps we can understand the mystery by one example. Paul tells us, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." (Rom. 8:26.) The word that is translated "helps" means "to take hold of something instead of and with another," thus "to come to the aid of that person." The way in which the Holy Spirit comes to the aid of the Christian in the midst of his weakness is illustrated by the experience of prayer. Man prays, but he is conscious that he does not know how to pray as he ought. As he struggles for fellowship and communion with God, he is conscious of the power of God entering into his heart, stimulating and directing his own powers of discernment far beyond what they naturally are. He cries out with unutterable groanings. Is it he or the Spirit of God who so cries out? It is both. Man does not act independently of the Spirit; he cannot. The Spirit does not act independently of man.

Much the same can be said of every other spiritually significant act of the Christian. When he is faced with temptation and overcomes it, he is conscious that it is the indwelling presence and power of God that has enabled him to be victorious. He cries out, "Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph." (II Cor. 2:14.) When he faces the storms and difficulties of life, he is aware of his own inadequacy, but he is aware as well that "all things are possible to me in my union with Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13; my translation). When he faces the task of witnessing to a lost world of the grace of God he proclaims: "Ye are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (II Cor. 5:20). This indicates that it is possible for an act to be the act of man but the results of that act to be thought of as the work of God.

Whether we understand it or not, the teaching of the New Testament is that salvation is by grace, that salvation in its entirety is the work of God's love. It is initiated by him; it is consummated by him. He is the savior. No matter how far back into our spiritual history we may go, we can never find a single contributing factor in our salvation that had its source in man. This is the central thought of the Bible when it speaks of the salvation of man.

## CHAPTER

## X

### *Damnation Is of Man*

NOT ALL men will be saved. Though it is becoming increasingly popular, universalism is not a teaching of the New Testament. Unpleasant as the thought may be, the New Testament teaches that some men, at least some and possibly many, will finally be damned. Jesus speaks of a resurrection of those "who have done evil" as a "resurrection of judgment" (John 5:29). He teaches that in the last judgment there shall be some who "will go away into eternal punishment" (Matt. 25:46). The writer of the Revelation draws a vivid picture of the last judgment and concludes: "If any one's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:15). Paul, though he does not often deal directly with the subject, insists that those who do not believe will be damned (II Thess. 2:12). The writer of Hebrews, viewing the possibility of eternal damnation, says, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31). Even after all allowance is made for Jewish imagery and full consideration is given to the redemptive purpose of God, there is no way of escaping the conclusion that there will be a portion of the human race that will not actually experience salvation.

Why will some be lost? The New Testament writers believed that the reason is to be found in man and in him alone; God is not responsible for the damnation of a single person. This statement can be established by noting several things. First, God has provided a way of salvation that could be uni-



versally effective if it were universally accepted. Many believe that the words of John 3:16 summarize the whole teaching of the New Testament on the subject of salvation. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Notice that the love of God was for the whole world, that the sacrifice of his Son was for the world, and that "whoever believes" may receive salvation. Paul insists that the Son was delivered up "for us all" (Rom. 8:32), that "there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For, 'every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved'" (Rom. 10:12-13). It is explicitly stated that "the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men" (Titus 2:11). The writer of The Revelation pictures the risen Christ as saying: "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' And let him who hears say, 'Come.' And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price" (Rev. 22:17). It would seem impossible to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ in any other way. Salvation has been provided for all men, and all men are invited to accept that salvation.

Furthermore, there is abundant evidence that God actually desires the salvation of all men, that he takes no delight in the damnation of the lost. Ezekiel reports that God has said to him. "Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezek. 33:11). Peter explains the delay in the end of the world and the coming of Christ as being due not to the slackness of God in keeping his promise but to God's desire that all men shall be saved. He says, "The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." (II Peter 3:9.) God is constantly pictured as seeking the salvation of men and is never pictured as seeking the damnation of any man. If we are to

seek the answer to our questions according to the New Testament teachings, we must seek it in man's rebelliousness and not in God's purpose.

Universally, in the New Testament, the damnation of man is referred to the contrary choice of man when confronted with the reality of God in his conscience, in nature, in the law or in the Gospel. The major discussion of man's sin in the New Testament is found in Rom. 1:18 to 3:19. Paul opens his discussion by proclaiming the fact that the "wrath" of God has been revealed (Rom. 1:18). This wrath of God is pictured as having been visited on all men, both Jew and Gentile. The reason for this visitation is that men "by their wickedness suppress the truth" (Rom. 1:18). Are any men able to stand before God as justified in their rebellion? The answer is no. The reason is that all men have been confronted with the reality of God in some way. The Gentile has been confronted with God in nature. Paul believes that the natural world reveals God to the extent that men may see his "eternal power and deity" (Rom. 1:20). Yet, in spite of its knowledge of God, the heathen world has not glorified God as god but has made images to worship in his stead. Because images are worshiped regardless of the spiritual light available, the heathen are "without excuse" (Rom. 1:20). The same thing can be said about the Jew. The light is different, but the principle is the same. The Jew had the advantage in that he was "entrusted with the oracles of God" (Rom. 3:2). But he acted in the same way: he rejected the light of God's word and rebelled against God. Therefore, he stands condemned before God as well, and that without excuse.

This same principle operates, with even greater guilt in the presence of the gospel of Jesus Christ. "He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, be-

cause their deeds were evil." (John 3:18-19.) Jesus announced that one result of his presence in the world would be "judgment." When the Pharisees asked, "Are we also blind?" he answered, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains" (John 9:39-41).

It would seem that all men are confronted with God in some way. They have some spiritual light. Many are concerned with the thought that God may condemn men and consign them to eternal punishment when they had no opportunity to know God at all. The New Testament faith is that all men have some means of knowing God available to them. They are responsible for acting in the light they have; they are condemned for their rebellion against the light of God. This does not mean that all men in their sin have sufficient light to enable them to be saved; it does mean that all men have sufficient light to make their sin inexcusable and to bring them justly under the judgment of God. The reason they are lost is because they have rejected light, not because they are ignorant of God. It is true that men may have different degrees of guilt, that greater light brings greater sin. The point we now make, however, is that all men have some light and are responsible to God to the extent that they have that light. Whether the light consists of the face of God in nature, in the human conscience, in the Jewish law, or in the Christian gospel does not matter at this point. All men are lost; all are condemned; all have sinned; all are to blame for their own spiritual condition. The reason man is lost is to be found only in man.

This statement would be sufficient if it were not for our contention that God is working out a redemptive purpose in the world. But when we insist that God is all-powerful, that he delights in salvation, that he seeks to save all men, a problem arises and tension is created in our minds. Why then are not all men saved? If God is all-powerful and desires the sal-

vation of all men, why does he not save all? It would seem that we must find an answer to these questions if we are to maintain our faith in the sovereign goodness of God. The answer that we found in the presence of evil in the world will not suffice here. There is no way in which we can say that the ultimate and eternal damnation of men can contribute to the good of men. Somehow, we must find the truth or we will be unable to maintain our faith.

In general two answers have been given to this problem. One is the answer that is usually, but wrongly, thought to be essentially associated with belief in divine predestination to salvation. It is the answer of "double election." According to this answer, God has by his own sovereign choice ordained that some men will be saved and that other men will be eternally lost. The causative factor in both the salvation of the redeemed and the damnation of the lost is to be found in God's choice, in his sovereign purpose. This answer cannot be ours if what we have already noticed to be the heart of the New Testament teaching on this matter is to be believed. It leaves God responsible for the damnation of man. For if God could save all men and does not, there is no way of maintaining the guilt of man in his own damnation. Though the implications of this position are softened by the assertion that God has his own reasons for his choice to damn some men — reasons that are inscrutable to us — it still leaves us with an inconsistency in the Biblical concept of God's redemptive love. This position, which we feel is false, is based on three fundamental errors: the misinterpretation of Scripture, the false application of logic, and a failure to understand the true nature of God's relationship with men.

First, the idea that God foreordains the damnation of men is supported by, if not based on, a misleading interpretation of some passages of the New Testament. Perhaps the chief passage used by those persons who support the doctrine of "double predestination" is Rom. 9:6-24. Within this passage